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COMPUTER

The PC Gaming Authority

GAMING WORLD

FOR OVER 20 YEARS
ISSUE 255

"IT WAS BAD"
VALVE'S
GABE NEWELL
ON STEAM'S
LAUNCH
PAGE 60 >

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

HALF-LIFE 2 AFTERMATH

A NEW HALF-LIFE
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EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

BATTLEFIELD 2 SPECIAL FORCES

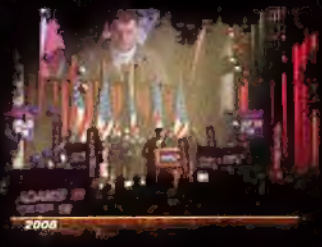
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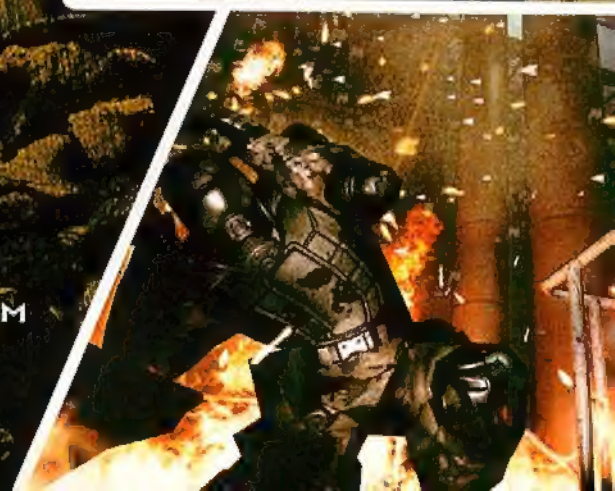
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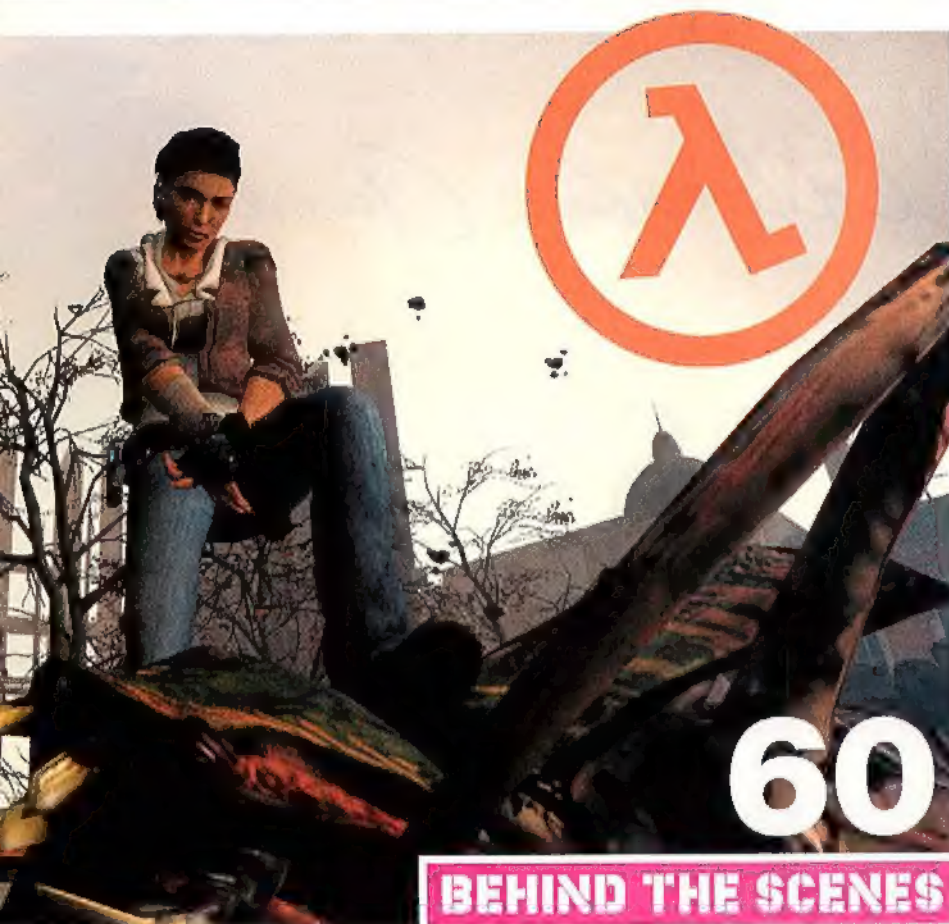


UBISOFT



CONTENTS

October 2005 Issue #255



60

BEHIND THE SCENES

12 Editorial

Maybe it's time to give Valve's Steam technology—our 2004 Coaster of the Year—a second chance.

13 Letters

CGW readers sound off about our brand-spanking new redesign.



POP CULTURE PARIAS



SCREAM PLAY



QUAKE 4



GUN



97

60

54

16

COVER STORY

FULL STEAM AHEAD

What did Valve really think of Steam's big launch? What's in store for Gordon Freeman after *Half-Life 2*? We've got everything you need to know about the future of the *Half-Life* series.

16 Radar

In the wake of the GTA Hot Coffee blowup, we're taking the fight to the mainstream media. We've also got some big previews and an exclusive chat with the *Battlefield 2* team on what went right—and what went wrong.

75 Reviews

The Bard's Tale makes its triumphant return to the PC in tongue-in-cheek action-RPG style, and television's popular medical drama *ER* makes its first (and hopefully last) appearance in game form.



SWAT 4



SUPPORT YOUR TROOPS

84 Tech

This month, we test two of the fastest PCs we've reviewed yet. They've crushed all of our benchmark scores...and coincidentally, they both pack A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboards and dual Nvidia 7800GTX graphics cards.

94 Tom vs. Bruce

Tom and Bruce join the war on terror...by playing *Battlefield 2*.



TECH



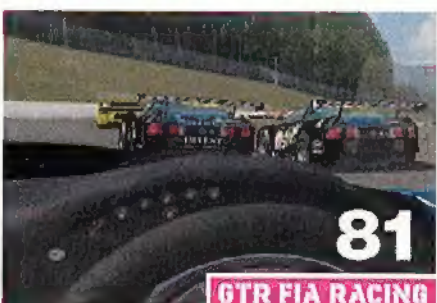
ON THE DISC



THE BARD'S TALE



TOM VS. BRUCE



GTR FIA RACING

GAME INDEX

- 76 The Bard's Tale
- 54 Battlefield 2
- 80 BloodRayne 2
- 44 Brothers In Arms: Earned In Blood
- 31 Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth
- 50 Call of Duty 2
- 48 Company of Heroes
- 32 Condemned: Criminal Origins
- 80 Crown of Glory
- 80 ER
- 32 Evil Dead: Regeneration
- 30 F.E.A.R.
- 81 GTR FIA Racing
- 38 Gun
- 60 Half-Life 2: Aftermath
- 31 Indigo Prophecy
- 33 Missing: Game of the Year Edition
- 22 Need for Speed: Most Wanted
- 32 Night Watch
- 36 Quake 4
- 79 Restricted Area
- 78 RYL: Path of the Emperor
- 26 The Sims 2: Nightlife
- 33 Stubbs the Zombie
- 33 The Suffering: Ties That Bind
- 40 SWAT 4
- 80 T-72: Balkans on Fire!
- 52 War Front: Turning Point

98 Scorched Earth

Where art thou, Romero?

**THIS MONTH
ON 1UP.COM**



BLAZYR.1UP.COM

1UP.com PC editor Garnett Lee recently moved all the way out to San Francisco from sunny Arizona so he could spend all day writing about videogames. Garnett, you nerd.

HALLOWEEN.1UP.COM

Need a good idea for a Halloween costume? Want to dress up like your favorite videogame character? 1UP.com tells you how.

BOARDS.1UP.COM

There's been some new blood on the CGW board lately, as previews editor Shawn Elliott has been quietly bringing the impressionable EGM forum kids over to our side of the fence.

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planning and shrewd combat tactics,
a new world full of promise is yours
for the taking. A new chapter is
yours to build. But will you
survive long enough to enjoy it?



EDITORIAL 255

STILL STEAMED?

Get over it—Valve's online plans are here to stay



REMEMBER STEAM? I SURE DO. WHEN REVIEWING *Half-Life 2* in our February 2005 issue, I raved about the game itself but ended up docking its final score by half a star because of Valve's proprietary online-distribution scheme, which I called, um, "an obtrusive, user-hostile abomination." And some people think I'm nice.

Now, in this month's cover story, Valve Software has graciously come back to talk to us about all sorts of new plans for Steam, and to offer some choice, honest comments about the original rollout. And while the

company is going on record here to admit that the launch wasn't quite as smooth as it should have been, I will be equally generous. In the spirit of fair play, and say that the future of Steam looks very bright indeed. And I'm not just saying that because Valve is on our cover.

The fact is, any idiot should realize at this point that it's only a matter of time before Valve's big idea—downloading games online rather than buying them at a store—is the way of the future. All media is heading in that direction, and when it works well, like with Apple's iTunes, it is spectacular. Feel like getting a new CD at 3 a.m. on a whim? It's yours five minutes later. How can you not love that?

And so it is with Steam. Valve has lots of work ahead of it. Games are way bigger and more complicated than MP3s. But Valve's forward thinking is exactly what the industry needs, and exactly why it is one of the most important companies in the industry today. Oh yeah, and every game Valve makes rules, too. Read all about the company in the pages ahead.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com
Now Playing: *Dungeon Siege II*, *WOW*,
GTA: San Andreas



DARREN GLADSTONE SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES)

Ultima III: Exodus on my Apple IIe, when my little sister "accidentally" bent the 5 1/4-inch floppy with my saved games.
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com
Now Playing: *Auto Assault*, *Darwinia*,
Tabloid Tycoon



SHAWN ELLIOTT EDITOR (PREVIEWS)

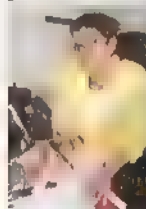
Horror of horrors: A now-fixed *Battlefield 2* bug blocked the weapons I'd spent weeks unlocking.
1UP.com Blog: cgwshawn.1UP.com
Now Playing: *Battlefield 2*, *Call of Duty 2*, *FEAR*



MICHAEL JENNINGS ART DIRECTOR

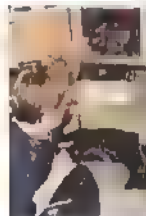
Dude, I haven't had a chance to play a PC game in days. Scary, eh?
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com
Now Playing: *WOW*, *Psychonauts*

GAMING HORROR STORIES



KRISTEN SALVATORE MANAGING EDITOR

Lara Croft's boobs were terrifying to women everywhere—all I could think was "back problems" and "black eyes." The poor dear...
1UP.com Blog: kristenss.1UP.com
Now Playing: *WOW*, *Auto Assault*,
Bala, *possum*



RYAN SCOTT EDITOR (REVIEWS)

Roberta Williams' Phantasmagoria genuinely scared the bejesus out of me, but my scariest gaming memory? Easy: *Carwoman*.
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com
Now Playing: *Warhammer 40,000*,
Dawn of War, *Winter Assault*



LOGAN PARR DISC PRODUCER

Anyone remember *System Shock*? Whoo! *Craepsville*!
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com
Now Playing: *Doom 3* and still trying to finish *KOTOR II*



SEAN DALLASKIDD ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Daily, I am crushed by my gaming nemesis, heday.1UP.com. Damn him...Iachi shall have his day!
1UP.com Blog: the_dallaskidd.1UP.com
Now Playing: *Hide and seek*

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ISSUE 255

LETTERS

YOU'RE SO
CUTE WHEN
YOU'RE ANGRYMY BIG FAT
GREEK
BLUNDER

Darren Gladstone's preview of upcoming indie game *Gods & Heroes* [CGW #254] mentions aching Roman history due to his having watched [special effects whiz] Ray

Harryhausen's movies. I assume he's referring to *Clash of the Titans*. That said, I'd say it's more likely that the writer wore the dunce hat in that history class, as *Clash* was based on Greek, not Roman, mythology.

Rick Perry

Senior editor Darren Gladstone responds: Hey, the Romans swiped most of their mythology from the Greeks—but yeah, you got me on that one. However, I meant Ray's work in general, as it popularized many of the monsters that appear in *Gods & Heroes*. So, I guess my geek cred is only slightly tarnished now.

CHANGE IS BAD...CHANGE IS GOOD

CGW #254 arrived today and, well, what's with the revamp? Could be that I just hate change, but I found the new look felt much more cluttered than the old one. And the superlarge font is sort of obnoxious. Sure, completely eliminating the curves in letters really says "computer magazine," but it's a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, too. Anyhow, I had to put in my two cents.

Dedicated Reader

Like the new, cleaner look for CGW. The sweet new layout and your school pictures both convince me that some change is a good thing.

Mike van Scherrenburg

WE STILL HATE DUNGEON LORDS

Denice Cook's *Dungeon Lords* review [CGW #254] is a disservice to the RPG genre. I understand CGW's policy of reviewing only final, released-to-retail code, but this critic was too critical and didn't see through some of the game's initial frustrations. (She also failed to mention anything positive about the product, which is a sure sign of a bias or at least a lack of understanding as far as the RPG genre goes.) For instance, you awarded *The Temple of*

DEAR CRAZY PERSON...

Raven can design the best single-player shooter ever, but if *Quake 4*'s deathmatching stinks, no one is going to care, because *Quake* is the quintessential multiplayer game...

Jeff Green—that statement underlined proves what a stupid f***in, god d*** sh***head you are! That has to be the most foolish thing I've ever read about videogames—I f***in care about the single player, a**hole, and I don't give a f*** about the multiplayer. So you're [sic] f***ed up story is wrong. If I were Raven, I wouldn't let you're [sic] old a** in there [sic] studio again. It's amazing how a f***in geek like you gets a job running a magazine. You're to [sic] old for this job. F***in quit. Robert Coffey—f***in quit. Darren G.—f***in quit. Ryan Scott—f***in quit.

Anonymous

Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green responds: Dad? I thought I told you never to write me here!

Elemental Evil 2.5 stars [CGW #234] *Dungeon Lords* is 10 times the game for the following reasons: level limits, class and character combinations, and a solid spell system. So while I wouldn't say the game comes close to deserving five stars, it does merit more than the zero-star score you gave it, at least if you consider the V1 3 patch

AFCHEEZE

We were a bit hesitant to give *Dungeon Lords* a zero-star score ourselves, at first—until we booted it up and saw exactly what Denice was talking about. In addition to the various issues cited in our review, this game thoroughly trashed the sound drivers on one of our office's PCs, which had to be completely wiped and reformatted. Needless to say, we stand by the final score—and for the record, we don't review patches.

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

I'm so glad that the ESRB cracked down on *Grand Theft Auto* by changing its rating from Mature (17+) to Adults Only (18+) and thereby ensuring that innocent 17-year olds, who may have unwittingly purchased the game expecting entertainment appropriate for their age group, are not scared for the entire 12-month period it'll take them to attain the maturity required to process such profanity. Way to go!

Jeremy Legg

SHEEP LOVIN'

While reading a rather old (March 2005) edition of CGW, I came across an entry that reminded me of the reason I'm ready to quit *World of Warcraft*. Remember the time when that level 21 mage named Bernie told us a tale where he was sheepling (polymorphing...whatever) level 40ish characters? That's not right. I know for a fact that if a level 21 mage tried to sheep a level 40 monster, it would play out something like "Bernie begs us to cast polymorph. Scarlet Monk resists. Bernie is hit for 2,453 damage. Bernie dies." Come now, Blizzard, I'm sure you want all the low-level characters out there to have some love, but let's make this realistic. I'm going to go cry myself to sleep now, with my tortured memories of running around aimlessly at level 60 as a helpless sheep.

Forcepath



I think I am cheating on my girlfriend with *Battlefield 2*.
—Oanh DBII

The new look is grand—more of a grilled pepper-steak sandwich than a cheeseburger.
—OIII

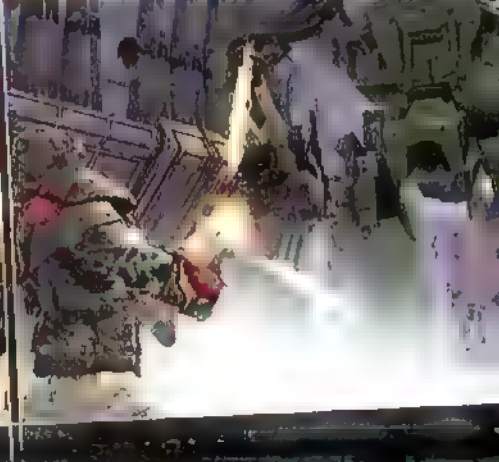
Regarding the new batch of RTS games: They all look amazing, but they all look the same.
—Drekkon

I tried the *Dungeon Lords* demo, and it's dookie.
—Brandon Engler

I would like to see ads on the left side of the magazine. I like to hold it a certain way so it is even more enjoyable to read.
—Eric Allen

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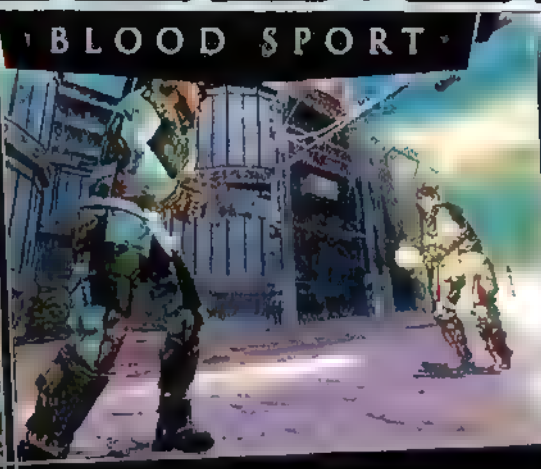


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BLOOD SPORT



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ISSUE 255

RADAR

NEWS,
PREVIEWS, AND
VISCERAL OPINION,
EVERY MONTH

DOES CULTURE PARIAH

Why are
videogames
the favorite
demon of the
mainstream
media?

By John Davison

PREVIEWS

Scream Play

Nine new games that go bump in the night.

30

FEATURE

Support Your Troops

Fight your grandfather's war in four great WWII games.

44

UPDATE

Battlefield 2 Post-Mortem

BF2's top brass point off in our post-blasting report.

54

"WELCOME TO THE DARK WORLD OF *GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS*—where killing cops earns you points, not prison."

—CBS Evening News

"What parents can do is recognize the games for what they are—rubbish—and teach their kids to resist indulging in their dark, degrading virtual worlds. And the rest of us can call out the makers of these games for what they are: vultures."

—Chicago Tribune

"Videogames can teach you all kinds of ways to kill. You can pick someone off with a high-powered rifle, reach into a human chest and rip out a beating heart, or turn someone into a chicken."

—Cleveland Plain Dealer

"Can a videogame lead to murder?"

—Ed Bradley, 60 Minutes

"All videogames are violent."

—Donny Deutsch, *The Big Idea*

Few would argue that the mainstream news media not only covers "hot-button issues" but also creates them. Like comic books and hip-hop music before them, videogames are currently fueling a firestorm of media controversy. But are CBS, Donny Deutsch, and Ed Bradley actually informing their viewers—or just inflaming their

fears in a culture already on edge?

Many, certainly many in the videogame industry, believe it's the latter. There's no shortage of gaming coverage, but it seems that what's out there, outside of enthusiast coverage, focuses disproportionately on certain kinds of games or on partial information that does no justice to the industry's successes.

Patricia Vance, president of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), is no stranger to the business end of media's videogame-beating stick lately. She believes the mainstream media is cherry-picking facts about gaming to show the industry in a bad light. "Few games are M-rated [for Mature content]," she points out, "but that's the type of game the mainstream media always shows when they want to drive home any point about videogames." In fact, only 12 percent of the games released so far in 2005 have been rated M, but they have clearly dominated mainstream news coverage on gaming.

The ESRB rating system is presented in two parts: rating symbols, which suggest age appropriateness for a game (there are six of them in total, pointing to games suitable for every age from early childhood to adult), and content descriptors, which indicate elements such as violence, foul language, or other potential media-baiting naughtiness, like sexual themes. In September 2002, the Federal Trade Commission stated, "There is much in the game industry's

rating disclosure requirements that merits duplication by others."

"Enforcement of M-rated game [sales] is a lot stricter than sales of R-rated DVDs at stores," says Vance. Of course, after the *Grand Theft Auto Hot Coffee* debacle, many mainstream media outlets called the system into question; however, while there were many reports on the sexual content "contained in the game," there was little mention of the fact that accessing that content required the player to unlock it using a file that had to be downloaded from the Internet for the PC version of the game, or by entering a series of codes into a separate application such as GameShark or Action Replay Max on the console versions.

MONSTERS IN THE CLOSET

Where, then, are the expressions of outrage about minors gaining entry to R-rated movies? Why are games vilified right now? Seth Schiesel, videogame reporter and columnist for *The New York Times*, says it's simply a generational issue.

"The first thing to understand is that very few people in mainstream media are actually gamers themselves," Schiesel explains. "There's a much broader gap of understanding than you traditionally find for other types of entertainment. A lot of the people running media outlets right now are of a different generation. They didn't grow up playing games, and the notion of doing so is alien

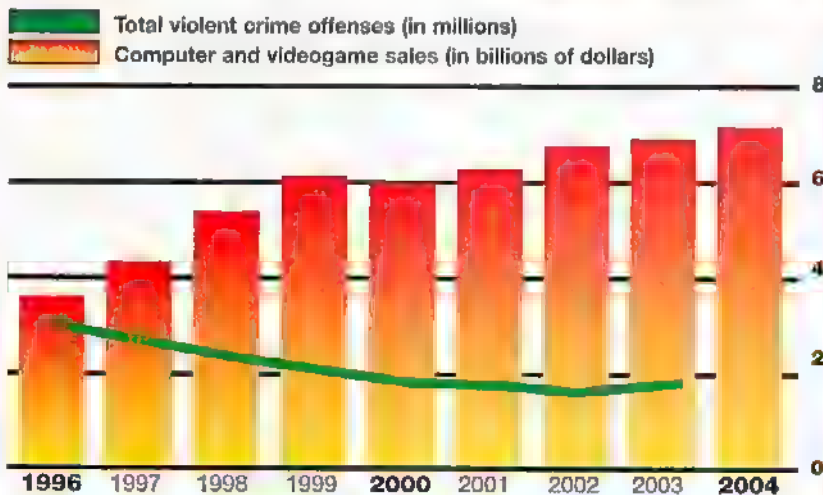
"WELCOME TO THE DARK WORLD OF *GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS*—WHERE KILLING COPS EARNS YOU POINTS, NOT PRISON."

—CBS EVENING NEWS



CRIME STORY?

Are videogames and violence actually linked?

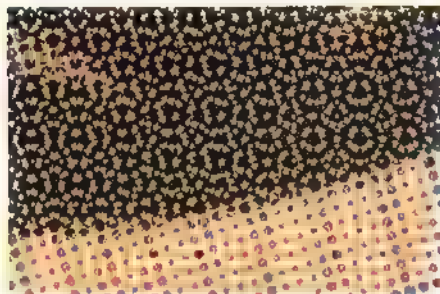


Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Entertainment Software Association

BYE-BYE BLING

GTA: San Andreas' ESRB rating change from M to AO—and its subsequent disappearance from most store shelves—could cost publisher Take-Two as much as \$50 million in lost revenue.





to them. Right now, the decision makers are simply too old to have grown up with games as part of their culture. The guys running media right now are in their 40s, so they don't have the same frame of reference."

That gap is mirrored in the population watching the news, too. Attitudes toward gaming vary greatly with age. In the United States, close to half the population plays PC games or videogames; however, most players are under 40. According to media research firm Nielsen, more than 75 percent of gamers fit that description—they are the generation that started playing games as kids, and they've continued playing.

Reaching across the gap is tough. "Games are completely different from all other types of entertainment," Schiesel explains. "They're much harder to explain to an audience that has no point of



"CAN A VIDEOGAME LEAD TO MURDER?" —ED BRADLEY, 60 MINUTES

reference. Anyone can watch a movie or television, read a book, or watch a play and draw their own conclusions. It's very difficult to ask someone who has never played a videogame to understand—particularly if they just don't have the ability to experience what you're talking about. It's like trying to describe the difference between the colors red and blue to a blind person."

"People think of videogames as toys," Vance says. "They saw them years ago and still think games are for kids." As a result, the gaming world isn't considered to be a source of legitimate regular news. In fact, the biggest complaint of many game-savvy journalists is that their editors, because they lack an understanding of the subject matter, refuse to acknowledge videogames as legitimate.

"Much of the mainstream media, our newspaper included, has not yet elevated videogames to the level of coverage that is given to movies, books, or TV," explains *USA Today* entertainment reporter Mike Snider. "That's despite the fact that it's a multibillion-dollar industry that rivals box office and surpasses book sales."

"I don't think it's entirely fair to say *all* of the mainstream media demonizes games," says Chris

Morris, director of content development at CNN Money and writer of the popular *Game Over* column on CNN.com. "There are some reporters who are quite wise about the way the industry works. There are some who don't quite understand it, and there are some who are only looking for headlines. The problem is, the ones who write something that's contrary to the opinions of most gamers are the ones who get attention online. Let's face it, you rarely see hordes of posts about something Geoff Keighley writes for *Business 2.0* or N'gai Croal writes for *Newsweek*, though the two of them know the industry better than many."

It's only when gaming is piggybacked onto other "legitimate" news that it gets covered—and that usually happens when there's a scandal. To wit: the Hot Coffee story.

"When a national figure like Hillary Clinton takes an interest in what's going on, there's no way to ignore that," Schiesel explains. "Something like that is a news event that has to be covered, and it draws attention to the games industry in ways that force questions to be asked." It also adds fuel to the fire for critics of the industry, who hardly need more ammunition, and makes for easier headlines at media outlets that don't have the full

❏ MEDIA "TO-DO" LIST

➤ At least for the foreseeable future, videogames will be the scapegoats for politicians, newspapers, and misguided parents looking to lay the downfall of Western civilization at our feet. That's why CGW has come up with a handy checklist of the next likely targets—and info on what the nightly news won't tell you about these games.

Hypocrites!
Even we get offended. Postal 2 got a zero star review from CGW, mostly due to offensive content.



187 RIDE OR DIE (Ubisoft)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: Road Outrage!
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: While this game certainly won't be a contender for a Nobel Peace Prize (or any other awards, by the looks of it), under the hood it's just *Mario Kart* for bigger kids—an arcade racer with some "urban" elements added. Only gamers need to be scared.



BAD DAY L.A. (Enlight)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: Kids' Games Gone Bad
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: The cartoony graphics and over-the-top violence are there to make a point. It's intended to be a comedy/action/disaster spoof with some social commentary. If you're offended by the violence, you're missing the whole point.



25 TO LIFE (Eidos)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: Virtual Cop Killers
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: When you get right down to it, this is a team-based version of something kids have been playing for ages: cops and robbers.



SNOW (2K Games)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: Busted! Digital Drug Deals
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: It's impossible to defend drug dealing, but at its heart, this game is something of a business development training tool. You travel the globe, learning to buy low and sell high while trying to stay one step ahead of the law. Kind of like Enron.

perspective on the game business.

It doesn't help that those with an "antigaming" agenda are so good at their jobs. "Foes of the industry are very, very good at public relations," Morris says. "By the time the ESA, ESRB, and others began trying to educate the public that games weren't just for kids anymore, opponents had already saturated the media with their releases for years, so it was harder for some to get perspective."

Schiesel agrees. "The 'antigaming' forces have been much more effective about getting their message across," he explains. "The game industry needs to do a better job of explaining that it's not just about shooting and killing. It needs to counteract the activists, who, let's face it, just have to show a screenshot of the Hot Coffee sex scene to get their message across. People that don't understand gaming make the connection: videogames, kids, sex... bad."

The man whose job it is to explain that it's not just about shooting and killing is Entertainment Software Association president Doug Lowenstein. In his keynote speech on the first day of E3 this year, Lowenstein fired what many observers feel was a shot across the bow of GTA: San Andreas developer Rockstar Games when he said: "We can use things like the American Constitution's guarantee of free speech as a shield to legitimize virtually any content. Indeed, the very essence of art is that it has no boundaries, and the critical acclaim accorded various paintings, photographs, or books attests to that. But I submit to you it is one thing to say a product is protected speech, which it is, or that it is rated and parents need to accept responsibility for what their kids play, which they do. But it is quite another thing to say we have no larger responsibility for shaping the quality and values of the culture we live in. We've all seen games that depict content that is constitutionally protected artistic expression and yet which also raises the question of whether it really was necessary to realize the designer's artistic vision. That's not a call for censorship or government intrusion into videogame sales. But it is meant to say that it is fair for critics, and us, to ask

whether everything that is cool and pushes the envelope is, in fact, creatively necessary."

Rockstar representatives declined to comment on the subject, but there's clearly tension within the industry itself when its champion is essentially telling the world that the cool kids need to dial it back a bit. If the ratings system is working and games are proving to be more popular than ever, is it really in the best interests of a company like Rockstar to back off? Is that really for the good of the gaming industry and for the "art" of game design? Or is the gaming industry being asked to police itself in hopes of dialing back the heat from the mainstream media?

SCIENCE TO THE RESCUE

Are we kidding ourselves? Are antigaming groups right: Are videogames teaching kids to kill? Not according to the numbers: As computer and videogame sales have steadily risen over the past eight years, the number of violent crimes has more or less stayed the same—and has actually dropped during certain periods. (See graph on page 17.)

Cultural critic Steven Johnson, the best-selling author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, says that in reality, games are helping teaching higher-level thinking and decision-making skills.

"It's not what you're thinking about when you're playing the game," says Johnson, "it's the way you're thinking that matters." (See page 20 for excerpts from CGW's recent interview with Johnson.)

The scientific evidence Johnson outlines in his book was recently echoed in *The Economist* magazine, which ran a cover story about gaming. The story's opening line? "There's no solid evidence that videogames are bad for people, and they may be positively good." But it's worth noting that the cover of the magazine reads, "Breeding evil? The real impact of videogames." Accompanied by an illustration of a demonic child holding a joystick on the cover,

the headline seems for all the world like yet another example of gaming being demonized in the press.

OUR KIDS WILL THINK THIS STORY IS STUPID

Johnson's book and *The Economist's* story may indicate that science is about to step in and help gaming's reputation, but the magazine's cover is a clear indicator that that reputation is still getting tarnished. What will help to get more, fairer coverage of the industry? According to many, it's a waiting game.

"Just as more public officials who have grown up with games as part of their leisure pursuits will take office, so will reporters and editors," says *USA Today's* Snider.

"Gaming is a new industry," adds CNN's Morris, "and any new entertainment field tends to attract scrutiny. It happened with cinema. It happened with music. It happened with comic books. Now it's happening with games. Ultimately, some new form of entertainment will come along that will attract the eyes of moral crusaders, and the game industry will spend less time in the spotlight."

"In the end, cultural credibility will come as the videogame generation itself grows into positions of power and influence over politics and culture, as today's GTA fans become tomorrow's senators and editors," Lowenstein predicted in the conclusion of his E3 keynote. "But in this period where we are no longer cultural outsiders, but rather are at the center of defining and creating the culture, some self-criticism and self-examination is healthy. Burying our heads in the sand or adopting a bunker mentality is an immature response."

No doubt, once gaming is fully embraced as part of our culture, there will be something new threatening to destroy our nation's youth.

John Davison is the Editorial Director of Ziff Davis' Game Group

"ALL VIDEOGAMES ARE VIOLENT." —DONNY DEUTSCH, THE BIG IDEA



MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE (Atari)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: Vandal Scandal!
Game Glamorizes Graffiti
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: Hip-hop hero Marc Ecko is behind this Orwellian vision of the near future where you tag buildings as a sign of protest. The most violence you'll see here is what the authorities do to you.



CRIME LIFE: GANG WARS (Konami)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: D12's Mob Family Values
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: Publisher Konami is quick to point out that there's a "morally infused story line" that has consequences for your good—and bad—deeds.



TOTAL OVERDOSE (Eidos)
PROBABLE HEADLINE: Drugs and Violence!
WHAT YOU WON'T HEAR: There are no actual drugs involved here, despite the misleading name. This arcade action game is actually a blatant "tribute" to Robert Rodriguez's acclaimed film *El Mariachi*.

CGW INTERVIEW: STEVEN JOHNSON

The author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You* justifies our love

➤ STEVEN JOHNSON IS OUR KIND OF hero. He's smart, he's a gamer, and he's not afraid to risk public skepticism by boldly declaring that those two things actually belong together. In May, the author of three previous books on science and technology released the best-selling and controversial *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, which posits that videogames, television, and other forms of popular entertainment currently vilified by politicians and media "pundits" are not only not rotting the minds of today's youth, but are, in fact, making them smarter. We recently sat down with the author to get his thoughts on the ongoing demonization of videogames.

CGW: Do you worry that you are preaching to the converted in a book like yours? Don't you think that no matter how intelligently you argue, some people are simply never going to get it about videogames?

Steve Johnson: I think that's inevitably true for a few reasons. Videogames just have lots of biases stacked up against them: First, they're games. For some people, this will just always implicitly be a waste of time. Second, there is a generational conflict. For older folks now, videogames are something "the kids" are doing—and old folks are always suspicious of what kids are doing. It's not unlike rock 'n' roll, which took 15 to 20 years to become legit, when the kids who were first into it became adults and the older generation died off. And third, games are just so complicated now that it's difficult to get parents into them to show [them] what they have to offer. Ironically, if today's games were less complicated, parents might have an easier time understanding what their kids were actually doing. They just don't have the time to go through what they would need to understand.

CGW: Why do you think videogames are being more demonized in the media than other forms of popular entertainment?

Johnson: The media understand games only to the extent that the kids are *doing* these actions rather than just passively watching. Their thinking is that once you shift from passively watching to actually making decisions about things like killing or carjacking, you must be more likely to do these things in real life. Worse are the arguments that these games are "training" kids to

perform these actions. This is often the attitude of old-school, progressive, "turn off your TV"-type parents, and they'll point to the fact that videogames are now used to train soldiers to kill, and so on. But you know what? They've been using books to train soldiers to kill, too, for hundreds of years.

CGW: But every time there is an act of egregious violence by young people, as in Columbine, people are always quick to point out that the perpetrators played videogames.

Johnson: And in the case of something like Columbine, there probably was some kind of connection. I mean, we know they played games like *Doom*. But psychopathic people are always influenced by the media around them—Manson by the Beatles, John Hinckley by *Taxi Driver*. You can't point to an isolated incident and condemn the whole media. On average, given the millions of people who play games, how often is this kind of thing happening?

CGW: We just read that a grandmother is suing Rookstar because she bought her 14-year-old grandson the M-rated *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and was stunned to find out that, thanks to the Hot Coffee mod, her grandson might see pixelated "sex" scenes now.

Johnson: The game was rated M to start with. That means it's for people 17 and older. So maybe her 14-year-old grandson should sue her instead. This kind of thing is just hysteria. The fact is, there is far more explicit stuff on TV—with real people, not pixels—that any kid with access to HBO or Cinemax could watch. How many homes have access to that stuff? Politicians like Hillary Clinton should know better. For them to jump on bandwagons like this is just a gratuitous thing to do, and a waste of time and money.

CGW: Really, though, shouldn't we all just be reading more?

Johnson: It depends on what books you're talking about. Some games can be extremely



complicated, intellectual experiences. If you're talking about a complex game like *Age of Empires* versus [the book] *Harry Potter*, I'd call it a draw. Both are intellectually rewarding experiences that use different parts of the brain.

CGW: So it's OK for us to sit on our asses and play games all day?

Johnson: The criticism that kids are just sitting around all day in front of the TV or games, not exercising, is completely fair. No one should do that. But equating TV time and videogame time is completely fallacious. There's a huge difference between the two. It's the difference between watching something passively and actively doing something. Think of watching a football game versus playing *Madden*. In the first case, you're watching passively, but in *Madden*, you're actively managing an entire team, constantly juggling hundreds of details. It's clearly a movement from less thinking to more thinking. /

➤ "The fact is, there is far more explicit stuff on TV that any kid with access to HBO or Cinemax could watch."

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The boys in blue are back in *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*

PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA Canada GENRE: Arcade Racer RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

THERE ARE NO BRIGHT LIGHTS IN THIS BIG CITY—UNLIKE *Need for Speed: Underground 2*'s nighttime neon competitions, all races in *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* take place between sunrise and sunset in a city with less flash and more grit, containing more "interactive" elements to jump over and smash through. That's an aesthetic difference that fans of the series will notice, but longtime NFS players in particular will dig a gameplay convention that makes everything old new again: police pursuits.

In *Most Wanted*, NFS: Hot Pursuit 2 (2002) meets NFS: Underground 2 (2004) as you strive to be not only the most notorious street racer in open-road competitions (building "street cred" to get your name on the blacklist), but also the most elusive, building up your rap sheet while escaping the clutches of the cops, who are looking to impound your ride. And those guys are not fooling

around. While the po-po may initially demonstrate concern for public safety and personal welfare, if your rap sheet grows long enough, they'll start employing some smarter and scarier strategies to get you off the road, such as sideswiping you, boxing you in among a group of black-and-whites, dropping spike belts to shred your tires, or just straight-up ramming you head-on. There are even various types of police vehicles on the lookout for you, each with special moves and technologies designed to take you down and take away your ride. Can you get your baby back? Yes, but only if you have enough scratch—each infraction on your rap sheet adds more money to the bottom line you owe at the impound lot.

But a little strategic tweaking and tuning may just keep you on the road: If the heat from the five-oh has gotten a little too hot, customize your ride to the point that they no longer recognize it. Or better yet, just keep outrunning them, along with your street-racing opponents. A new tool at your disposal is the so-called speed breaker, a sort of bullet-time for cars that lets you briefly slow everything down so you can maneuver around hairpin turns, pull off impossible jumps, and slice through narrow police roadblocks. And, of course, the whole reason to keep burning up the gas is to rise through the ranks and become the most notorious street racer out there. *Z*

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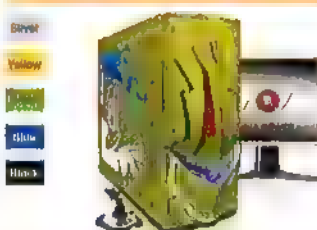
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PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

An epic night out with *The Sims 2: Nightlife* expansion

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Maxis GENRE: Sim RELEASE DATE: September 2005

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

> The Sims 2 Nightlife isn't just a "hot date." This expansion pack gets your Sims out the door and doing something between work and crashing for the night. There's a lot to do in Simsville, and it's a little hard to build up those Social and Friendship scores if you're staying inside and watching the tube all night. And, really, isn't the point of life to get a little "woohoo"?



6:35 P.M. Serena's commitment to fulfilling Jim's Pleasure aspiration pays off—he presents her with a gorgeous bauble over a candlelight dinner at the town's new bistro. Someone's gonna be woohooing tonight!



7:42 P.M. Joane, Sam, and Elena decide to hang out at home and play poker. Ever since Elena's unfortunate experience dating one of the new vampires in town, the girls stick together and go bowling or play games at the house. Of course, the friends could get more "interested" in one another in the hot tub. Someone's gonna be woohooing tonight!



8:18 P.M. George clearly shouldn't quit his day job, but he's having such a good time that his Outing score with his pals keeps rising. Plus, the attraction system tells George there's a hot number in the corner whose personality, life aspiration, and zodiac make them totally compatible. Someone's gonna be woohooing tonight!



9:40 P.M. Jean and James left their alien baby, Fooze, at home with the nanny. Now they're enjoying a slow dance at the new lounge in town. Since they're on a date, their wants and fears are all related to that specific outing. Can you guess what James wants? Someone's gonna be woohooing tonight!



2:35 A.M. Under the flash of strobe lights, Shawna and David catch each other's eye at the hot new nightclub in town. She blows him a kiss after he suggests they should take a ride in his new car. Someone's gonna be woohooing tonight! (And if they do it in the car, the windows will fog up. Seriously.)

GLADSTONED

Senior editor Darren Gladstone's monthly rant

➤ The number of broadband users continues to grow, as does the general laziness of the instant-gratification-crazed "couch potato" generation. Clearly, it's time for 2005's Games-on-Demand report card. Who makes the grade?

REPORT CARD

PROVIDER	SERVICE	SELECTION	EXAMPLES	COMMENTS
COMCAST GAMES ON DEMAND www.comcast.net	B-	B+	<i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell</i> <i>Pandora Tomorrow</i> , <i>Warlords</i> <i>Battlecry II</i> , <i>Monopoly</i>	A little messy, but a good student
DIRECT2DRIVE www.direct2drive.com	C+	A	<i>SWAT 4</i> , <i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell</i> <i>Chaos Theory</i>	Paying attention, but not making friends
STEAM www.steampowered.com	B+	B	"Little" games like <i>Half Life 2</i> and <i>Counter-Strike</i> —plus countless mods	Showing signs of improvement... good job, Valve!
TURNER GAMETAP www.gametap.com	A+	A-	<i>Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell</i> , <i>Tekken</i> , <i>Ms. Pac-Man</i> , <i>Pong</i>	Most promising new student
YAHOO! GAMES ON DEMAND gamesondemand.yahoo.com	A-	B	<i>Project: Snowblind</i> , <i>Rise of Nations</i> , <i>Pacific Gunner</i>	Getting a little confident, aren't we?

COMCAST GAMES ON DEMAND

Whether you're talking kids' games (\$8 per month) or the full package (\$15 per month), Comcast has a huge selection. It works by downloading the needed game files to your PC. This way, you have to wait only once.

It works well—the only real downside is the painfully basic Web interface. Hey, Comcast, would it kill you guys to add a My Games list? My desktop is now littered with game shortcuts.

DIRECT DRIVE

A part of IGN Networks, Direct2Drive serves as a one-stop online shop for everything from guides to games. Order and download an entire game to your hard drive. Then back it up to a disc or just download the game again later—the site tracks what you've bought.

The downsides are the extra security hoops you've got to jump through (three layers of serial codes in some cases) and the price—you're paying full retail! Thanks for cutting out those middlemen and passing the savings on to us, guys.

STEAM

After winning the "coveted" Coaster of the Year in 2004—congrats!—Steam is finally coming

around. Updating is easy, mods are freely available, and the applet has a simple interface. I'm just afraid that in the future, my tool tray will end up choked with applets by every developer.

Obviously, this is the only way to get *HL2* and other Source-engine-based games online, but therein lies the problem. While we've got no beef with the games themselves and the mods they spawn (it's easy finding mods!), I still can't grab *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* over the service.

TURNER GAMETAP

Somewhere between a TV network and a games-on-demand service lies GameTap. Playing host to games dating back to the dawn of the quarter-munching era, GameTap is an emulator and then some, pulling games from the Atari 2600, Sega Dreamcast, Sega Genesis, Intellivision, PlayStation, and PC. The Xbox-like interface makes it easy for you to sift through the hundreds of available games by using a gamepad or keyboard. The real genius, though, comes in the supplemental materials. Let's say you want to play the original *Pitfall*. An information card gives a brief history of the title, and you can even dig up the "classic" 1970s TV commercials.

While downloading games, you can watch short

pieces of original content. A bonus of being a part of the Turner Broadcasting empire is getting access to some of the writers from Cartoon Network's Adult Swim. It's a trip to see Space Ghost interview videogame champ Billy Mitchell in the pilot episode of his eponymous show.

GameTap is not an altogether bad deal for \$15 a month. That is, except for the fact that there are no plans to include Nintendo or M-rated games in the service. What? Is there a "Hot Mano" mod I'm not aware of? Wait. I don't want to know. (Turner is still considering a premium for M-rated titles).

YAHOO! GAMES ON DEMAND

While it has that all-important My Games list, last year's valedictorian is slipping. Yahoo is no longer getting some of the freshest games around. The service still has a wide selection, sure, but we want the most consistent collection, and we don't want to sift through Wal-Mart filler like *Pacific Gunner*. At least it works with the same seamless caching technology Comcast uses.

Another bonus is that beyond the \$15 per month all-you-can-eat plan, Yahoo is the most flexible. You can do a three-day "rental" for \$5.

Wanna pick a bone with Gladstone? E-mail him at darren.gladstone@ziffdavis.com /

CONSOLE CORNER A LOOK AT THE REST OF THE GAMING WORLD

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BURNOUT REVENGE

There's something cathartic about watching a team that's been on a losing streak and some chump sneering into a team that you think is a shutdown team all about high speeds and rockets, and probably the best console racing around. Once productivity is back, it's a shutdown the Criterion continues to grow in PS3 in this series, but we can't deny the fun of the game. Several years ago, the game's amazing look on better with more and more consoles in the series. It's a great

the more you know about Ford's new midsize sedan, the more you'll want to know about other cars and use the call toll-free number to cut the opposition. Of course, you'll get control and become your ride's postmaster. Gribbing away, you may find that the speed and brake feature shortens the road can use to your benefit.

What we can do about them, though, are the milage and the cost of the car. Most of us are all hovering around the demure, non-flying *BMW* and *Talend*. This time, we can't go to the store and buy a car. It's not like we can't go to the store and buy a car. It's not like we can't go to the store and buy a car.





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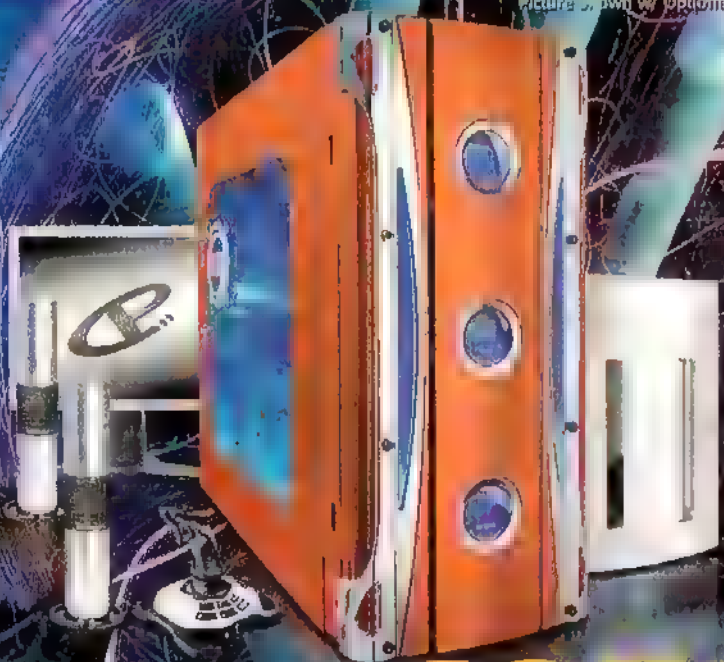
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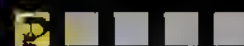
Games that go "click click" in the night

Halloween is just around the corner, which means cheesy monster costumes, gratuitous amounts of fake gore, midnight B-movie marathons, and, of course, a pile of creepy, cool games to play. We've got the lowdown on all the spooky titles you'll be playing this year and next—as well as a handy guide to what's going to frighten you the most.

00:00:40:29

FEAR FACTOR

We rate each game on a scale of 1 to 5 skulls, so you can tell at a glance just how scared you're going to be.



GOOSEBUMPS



THE TOXIC AVENGER



THE RING



THE EXORCIST



FACES OF DEATH



▲ Spooky: Some apparitions dissolve into ash before you can blast 'em.



▲ Focus on the guy in your face, first, eh?



F.E.A.R.

PUBLISHER: VU Games DEVELOPER: Monolith Productions GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: October 2005

WHAT IS IT?

The spooks of strike force F.E.A.R. step in when the Pentagon's supersecret projects go wonky. They're the fail-safes who tackle the strange stuff—clone battalions, invisible bogeymen, and the sort of bad little girls that paste people with thoughts alone.

SCARE TACTICS

More than half of F.E.A.R. focuses on blowing crap to kingdom come, and its slow-mo superpower is pure pyrotechnic zam pow. "[The feature] just puts you in the director's chair for your own John Woo-style carnage," says producer Rob Loftus. Shock-blasted bodies tumble, and suspended constellations of brass casings and glass and blood map out the mayhem as it happens. You could also say that the clock-tampering thing is a necessary crutch—your best bet

for sticking it to unsettlingly smart A.I.

The other part of F.E.A.R., the part we're psyched for, plays to the potential of first-person perspective—beyond letting you look down gun sights—by putting specters in the periphery of your vision. Climb a ladder, for instance, and you might catch a glimpse of feet standing at the top, only to have them disappear as you do a double take. "You can't tell if something is creeping up behind you until you turn, you can't see around corners to prepare for the next battle," Loftus says. "Your own eyes deceive you, and everything is delivered as it would be in real life. It makes you more aware of your environment and gives the scare moments a greater impact." / Shawn Elliott

FEAR FACTOR



INDIGO PROPHECY

▲ Clean up—otherwise, you'll leave clues for the cops to spot later.

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Quantic Dream GENRE: Adventure RELEASE DATE: September 2000

WHAT IS IT?

Try melding *Angel Heart* with 24 while reading a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book and you'll have some idea of what *Indigo Prophecy* is. This supernatural thriller follows three characters: There's Lucas, who is frantically attempting to piece together what is happening to him (and why he killed someone with a steak knife), and Carla and Tyler, the two police detectives who are pursuing Lucas.

There are other unique elements to appreciate here. First is the game world's interactivity.

For example, a police officer knocks on Lucas' door. A dynamic window cinematically pops up showing the waiting cop; meanwhile, you scour the apartment to hide evidence. Saying a few choice words or completing a minigame are the only ways to deflect suspicion.

These minigames are found throughout *Prophecy*. Most gamers don't like being bogged down with noninteractive cut-scenes when something exciting is happening, and developer Quantic Dream's elegant solution to the problem is incorporating simple timing-based puzzles.

SCARE TACTICS

After killing an old man in cold blood, you take the controls, drag the fresh corpse into an empty stall, and swab away the gore...and that's just the opening sequence.

You'll be shocked, but you also need to help the characters keep their cool in *Indigo Prophecy*. A sanity bar tracks mental health, so if Lucas gets too freaked out, he may become tougher to control. / Darren Gladstone

FEAR FACTOR 

CALL OF CTHULHU: DARK CORNERS OF THE EARTH

PUBLISHER: 2K Games/Bethesda Softworks DEVELOPER: Headfirst Productions GENRE: Adventure RELEASE DATE: February 2000

WHAT IS IT?

When it comes to mind-numbing terror, literary master HP Lovecraft reigns. The late author's novellas and short stories, collectively referred to as the Cthulhu Mythos, tell of unspeakable horrors and cosmic threats far beyond the scope of human understanding—and likely to drive curious minds thoroughly insane.

Dark Corners of the Earth is a first-person adventure inspired in part by the popular *Call of Cthulhu* tabletop RPG. You'll step into the shoes of 1920s private investigator Jack Walters, who—in true Lovecraftian fashion—has just left an asylum after suffering untold evils while working on a particularly nasty case. You'll make your way through over a dozen intricate levels, solving puzzles and digging up secrets as you move increasingly closer to the center of a disturbing conspiracy.

SCARE TACTICS

What really scares us is that it's been a good five years since *Dark Corners* was announced. Fortunately, developer Headfirst Productions seems to have used its time wisely, as the game features plenty of great Lovecraft-inspired horror elements that should devilishly delight Mythos fans.

Sanity (or lack thereof) plays a big part in *Cthulhu* fiction, and *Dark Corners* is no exception. Walters struggles with habitual bouts of madness, which manifest in hallucinations and other strange effects as he grapples with otherworldly terrors. And while there's plenty of action to be found, this is no FPS—in the world of *Cthulhu*, stealth and puzzle solving take the forefront...along with copious amounts of gibbering and wide-eyed insanity. / Ryan Scott



▲ You're usually better off running away rather than trying to fight.

FEAR FACTOR 

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Monolith GENRE: Action RELEASE DATE: October 2005

WHAT IS IT?

Like *F.E.A.R.*, developer Monolith's other head game in the making, *Condemned* challenges your senses and sense of reality. As Ethan Thomas, an FBI investigator in charge of tracking down serial killers, you'll look, with your own eyes, into the mouth of madness. As producer David Hasle has it, "You'll have to search for clues, including footprints, discarded trash, and even your own flashbacks, to find the bad guys as you progress through the game." Furthermore, hallucinations cloud your first-person perception throughout the game, fooling you into swiping at things that may or may not be there (another trick—also used in *F.E.A.R.*—that Monolith is getting frighteningly good at).

Sleuthing aside, you'll spend much of your time clobbering crazed homeless people (whose motives are part of the larger mystery). And while you'll come across boomsticks and Tasers to take 'em out with, buckshot is scarce enough so that you can't always go all *Doom 3* and blast your way out of trouble. Instead, you'll need to make do with whatever

pipes and rebar you come across in *Condemned's* grimy, unwashed world. Sure, it sounds crass, but so far timing parrying patterns while beating down aggressive panhandlers reminds us more of *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* than a videogame version of *Bum Fights*.

SCARE TACTICS

"The saturated black-and-white art style that shows up at times helps set the game apart from other titles in the horror genre," Hasle says. *Condemned's* camera tricks and surround sound should keep you jumping at shadows. How do we know? We just unloaded our last shotgun shell into an ethereal serial killer that didn't actually

/Darren Gladstone

FEAR FACTOR



NIGHT WATCH

PUBLISHER: N/A
DEVELOPER: Nival
Interactive GENRE:
Strategy-RPG
RELEASE DATE: TBA

WHAT IS IT?

A secret society keeps the world in balance, and in this strategy-RPG, you control a squad of these peacekeepers. Playing as a mage, shapeshifter, or enchanter in Moscow sounds interesting, but the biggest selling point for us: Nival. The developer of *Silent Storm* (and the upcoming *Heroes of Might and Magic V*) is putting together another engrossing tactical experience. Nival has built off the framework of the *Silent Storm* engine, which means dozens of skills and spells for your characters to master and—of course—fully destructible environments.

SCARE TACTICS

Night Watch ties in closely with last year's Russian fantasy-thriller film *Nochnoy Dozor*. The scary part is that we have no word when this game is going to show up in the States. For now, you may have to fish through European sites for an English version.

/Darren Gladstone

FEAR FACTOR

EVIL DEAD: REGENERATION

PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Cranky
Pants Games GENRE:
Action RELEASE
DATE: September 2005



WHAT IS IT?

Ashley J. "Ash" Williams, the irrepressible zombie-hunter from the *Evil Dead* movies is back, voiced as always by horror-film icon Bruce Campbell. This time, the story line deviates from the big-screen trilogy, placing Ash in an urban deadite-ridden environment post-*Evil Dead II*. *Regeneration's* action-oriented gameplay is pretty much exactly what you'd expect: Our hero kicks ass, takes names, carries a big shotgun, and spouts disposable one-liners all the way.

SCARE TACTICS

The last *Evil Dead* PC game, *Hell to the King*, was a disaster...and the console-only follow-up, *A Fistful of Boomstick*, was even worse. We aren't quivering in our boots or anything here, but fledgling developer Cranky Pants Games just might surprise us.

/Ryan Scott

FEAR FACTOR

STUBBS THE ZOMBIE IN REBEL WITHOUT A PULSE

PUBLISHER: Aspyr DEVELOPER: Wisehead Games GENRE: Action RELEASE DATE: October 2005

WHAT IS IT?

Traveling salesman Ed "Stubbs" Stubblefield's murder is more of a Fuller brush with death—following a two-decade dirt nap, the lifelong loser finds himself raised from the dead in a dystopian '50s Tomorrowland.

"We started with the idea of a heroic zombie whose goal is to conquer a city by converting the inhabitants into zombies," explains *Stubbs the Zombie* creator Alex Seropian. "Naturally, we wanted him to show up in some place that was nice and clean and built on a foundation of boundless optimism. The 1950s are emblematic of that, at least in America—there's this nostalgic idea of that decade as a time when everyone was clean shaven and polite and pure of heart. And of course there's that dark layer of tension lurking just beneath that facade...not unlike a zombie in a shallow grave."

SCARE TACTICS

Stubbs plays its scares for laughs. As for the slapstick eat-em-up's inspiration: "The Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allan Poe is the big one," says Seropian, "followed closely by every zombie movie ever made, particularly *Dead Alive*. Throw in *The Blues Brothers* and WC Fields, and you'll have some idea of where it all came from."

Stubbs' weapons are as quirky as his world is kitschy. The ghoul tosses handfuls of his own explosive bowels like grenades, his detachable limbs limp around à la *The Addams Family*'s Thing, and his bite converts hapless humans, allowing him to create hordes of brain-hungry henchmen. And he holds truck with modern conveniences: "When [Stubbs] crawls out of the grave in the middle of this weird city where funny-looking cars and trucks hover above the road, it's only natural that he'd want to take a spin in one or two," Seropian hints. If you don't like his driving, try calling his mortician. /Shawn Elliott

FEAR FACTOR 



THE SUFFERING: TIES THAT BIND

PUBLISHER: Midway
DEVELOPER: Surreal
Software GENRE:
Action RELEASE DATE:
September 2005

WHAT IS IT?

Think *Manhunt* meets *Silent Hill*, with good and evil paths to follow. *Ties That Bind* picks up where the original *Suffering* ended, as a death row escapee named Torque attempts to discover the truth about his family's brutal murder. As before, our "hero" isn't quite right in the head—and now he's being pursued by a mysterious shadow organization that's interested in his freaky, Hulk-like transformation abilities.

SCARE TACTICS

Ties That Bind lays on the disturbing plotlines and imagery, with everything from the whispered voices that Torque hears to the over-the-top violence you'll carry out against the twisted abominations that pursue you. Yeah, you'll transform into something a little less freaky if you opt for the "good" path—but you'll still paint the town red either way.

/Ryan Suett

FEAR FACTOR 

MISSING: GAME OF THE YEAR EDITION


PUBLISHER:
DreamCatcher
DEVELOPER: Lexia
Numerique GENRE:
Adventure RELEASE
DATE: September 2005

Missing is a shining example of an adventure game done right. It also nabbed the title of Best Adventure Game of 2004. The setup: Two journalists, Sam and Lex, find the only trace of their whereabouts is an abandoned CD-ROM. Developer Lexia Numerique has cleverly set up a web of e-mails for the game, with more clues hidden on other legitimate sites. You'll hunt for evidence as you progress through the story, and the game even helps you along in your investigation by e-mailing hints to you.

SCARE TACTICS

Missing's eerie music, foggy atmosphere, and cleverly hidden clues eventually carry you into the depths of a madman's mind. This repackaged set offers up the same mind-bending puzzles as the original, plus *The 13th Victim*, an expansion that never appeared Stateside.

/Darren Gladstone

FEAR FACTOR 



Hopefully, Boll won't use game assets for special effects, like he did in *House of the Dead*.

BOX OFFICE SIEGE

Director Uwe Boll brings his own special brand of magic to the *Dungeon Siege* movie

➤ WHAT'S THERE TO DO AFTER unleashing the 2003 Clint Howard vehicle *House of the Dead* and this past February's *Alone in the Dark* starring Christian Slater and Tara Reid? If you're director Uwe Boll, the new undisputed king of the B movie, you somehow get a \$60 million-plus budget and go to work on the *Dungeon Siege* movie.

The plot, in a nutshell: A farmer named—you guessed it—*Farmer* is on a quest to stop the animal-warrior krugs who have kidnapped his wife and murdered his son.

The biggest shock is the list of fairly respectable talent signed up to work with the German-born B-movie impresario. Heading up the cast is Burt Reynolds, Ray Liotta, Ron Perlman, John Rhys-Davies, Jason Statham, Matthew Lillard, Claire Forlani...wait. Did we read that right? Burt Reynolds? Unfortunately, neither cast nor crew was reachable at press

DO UWE BOLL?

Ed Wood's got nothing on maverick director Uwe Boll. As it stands right now, Boll's working on five videogame-based movies: *Far Cry*, *Postal*, *Hunter: The Reckoning*, *Dungeon Siege*, and *BloodRayne*. All of them are slated to be done by the end of 2006 (with *BloodRayne* in theaters this fall). This got us wondering if Boll has any designs on the rest of the game world. Look for "Do Uwe Boll?" throughout this issue. And next month, read our full interview with the man himself.

time due to film production commencing in Vancouver, but we did get a few choice words from Chris Taylor, creative director at *Dungeon Siege II* developer Gas Powered Games. "When I sat down to create *Dungeon Siege II*, I envisioned it like a movie with a good story—and this is what I get!"

Darren Gladstone

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

Majesco CEO bolts under strange circumstances

➤ WHEN MAJESCO CAME ON THE scene, it aggressively acquired titles nobody else would take their chances on, such as *BloodRayne*, *Advent Rising*, and the critically acclaimed *Psychonauts*. Recently, though, the Edison, NJ-based game publisher has been facing some serious scrutiny. Majesco's high-profile CEO, Carl Yankowski, hastily resigned (one source says it was "a mutual parting of ways" without a severance package) from his position in early July, just one month after making some very positive post-E3 comments regarding the company's 2005 financial outlook. Mediocre sales of *Psychonauts* and

the Xbox version of *Advent Rising* have contributed to an unexpected downturn in Majesco's profits—and to make matters even worse, four class-action lawsuits have been filed against the company by angry shareholders, who have accused Yankowski and CFO Jan E. Chasen of deliberately overestimating earnings by reporting numbers of games shipped to retail stores as opposed to units sold in order to inflate Majesco's value on the stock market. Majesco representatives had no public comment, and Yankowski, who has apparently fallen off the planet, was unreachable. Hopefully, the company will be able to bounce back. /Ryan Scott

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

THE GOOD ACCLAIM BACK FROM THE DEAD

AKKlaim
Entertainment GmbH

After a year of war, former game publishing juggernaut Akkaim Entertainment (the original publisher of *THQ's* *Vulgar*) filed for bankruptcy, thanks to a debt in excess of \$100 million. Now, it seems the Taiwan-based General Investment Holdings has reached an agreement to purchase the Akkaim name for \$100,000. Could this be the start of a new era for the dead, departing company?

THE BAD EVERQUEST FAN SERVER GETS BUSTED

The quest for a popular *EverQuest* fan server, *Winter's Rose*, has been solved, at least for now. The server, which was run by a group of fans, was shut down by the game's publisher, SOE. SOE legal representatives for the server, which was named "Winter's Rose," an intriguing work, pure and simple. Additionally, the people responsible habitually violated express provisions of the user agreement and server license. Winter's Rose's administrators have responded by announcing their own original MMO, *Quest*, which you can check out at www.questgame.com.

THE UGLY HIP INTERACTIVE GOES BANKRUPT

Games.com published hip interactive magazine *Interactive* has ceased operations, having filed bankruptcy, thanks to a series of financial problems. Insiders say that this is partly due to the less-than-stellar sales of *Perish* and *Rayboy: The Menace*. Hip Interactive subsidiary is taking over the overseas publishing duties on future games, including *Ghost Wars*, *City of the Dead*, and *Call of Cthulhu: Destiny's End*. We hope this won't affect Hip's North American publishing schedule too much—we've been frothing at the mouth for *Ghost Wars* since we first discovered it during this week's *Electronic Entertainment Expo*. /

IT'S IN THE DARKEST DAY,
WHEN A LEADER RISES INTO THE LIGHT.

WARRIORS



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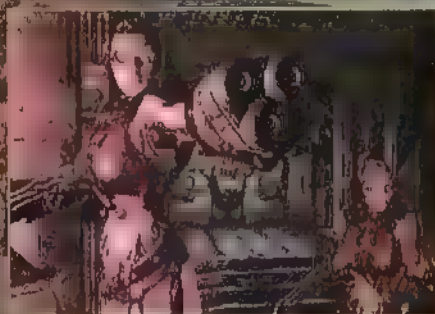
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DUNGEON SIEGE

QUAKE 4

Big freakin' tanks



"THE
OF NINE"

AAK





PUBLISHER: Activision X-BOX: Raven Software (GEM) Shooter RELEASE DATE: When it's ready

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

IN OUR JUNE ISSUE, WE BLEW YOUR minds with the scoop on *Quake 4*: Early in the game, you become an alien strogg creature during a horrific transformation sequence. While we happily broke the news, it also set off a few alarm bells. Did we just spoil the game's big surprise? We posed the question to Activision spokesperson Maclean Marshall, who had this to say: "You become stroggified only about a third of the way through [the game]. Obviously, we don't want to give

away too much more...but there's a lot more in store."

We recently got some hands-on time with some tanks and mechs, and after our test drive, we're inclined to agree. Though it's not readily apparent in this awesome screenshot, the hovortank gives you a nice turret's eye view of the action, while the lumbering mechs are missile-launching, machine-gun-toting monstrosities.

As we blasted through the first few levels in these cool new vehicles, we began to notice lots of carefully goosed moments and scripted sequences that kept us on high

alert throughout the experience. Think of it as an extension of what *Doom 3* did, but with a little more sophistication. Just don't expect too many surprises the second time you play through.

While Activision wasn't ready to show off multiplayer quite yet, one insider has since told us it will be one of the game's big selling points. We're not counting on seeing any vehicular combat until *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*...but heck, saying multiplayer will be big in *Quake 4* is like saying Sam Jones might be a little hungry.

Darren Gladstone

REWARD
\$5000
WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE

WIRED WEST

Skateboarding isn't the only Tony Hawk developer Neversoft's Gun

PREVIEW

SHOWDOWNS AT THE OK CORRAL, stagecoach robberies, and roguish strangers riding off into the sunset—there's something mythic about the American West, but it's a rarely used motif in games (we can count the number of shoot-em-up Westerns on one hand—and LucasArts' *Outlaws* came out back in 1997!). So who better to set their sights on an open-ended outlaw epic than...the people behind the *Tony Hawk* skating series? Strange as it may sound, Neversoft is hard at work on *Gun*, a *Grand Theft Auto*-style, go-where-you're-goin'-kill-who-you're-killin' Western due this fall. And no, you can't grind hitching posts in an unlockable *Pro Skater* mode. / Darren Gladstone



▲ FREE-MOSEYING ENVIRONMENT

There's a spaghetti Western plot to unspool (no risk of spoilers here—your pa's been done in, and it's time for revenge, daggumit!), but you can make your way through the post-Civil War West at your own pace. Montana, Kansas, and New Mexico are among the places you'll visit. But instead of boosting cars to get around, as you would in any other good GTA knockoff, you're boosting yourself into a saddle.



▲ HOW THE WEST WAS WON

The West back then wasn't a pretty place. At least the same can't be said about *Gun*'s graphics. Sure, it's no *Half-Life 2*, but the game is looking all right for a third-person actioner. And in this particular action game, expect plenty of dustups with the locals. In the 1880s, that usually meant talking with your fists or a six-shooter. Shotguns, hatchets, and dynamite are just some of the things to choose from when fighting your way out of a barroom brawl.



▲ DRAW!

Most of the game takes place in the third-person perspective, but sometimes you need to see up close who needs killin'. Quick draw mode puts you in first person perspective and also slows down time. As the quick draw meter ticks down, start shooting. Pulling off skill shots, like shooting a yellabellie in the head or knocking the gun out of his hands, buys you more time in this mode. One cause for concern: Producer Irwin Chen isn't sure if the console versions' "soft toggling" between targets play mechanic (to assist gamepad players) is PC bound. The last thing keyboard-mouse aiming needs is some sissified babying!



▲ GRAND THEFT BOVINE

As you'd expect on wide-open ranges, there's a lot to do here besides causing stirrs at the local brothel. How about something more peaceful like hunting buffalo while roaming the plains or corralling cattle as a rancher? As for minigames, try choosing a simple timing-based challenge or attempt to fend off rustlers while you work.



▲ DEALER'S CHOICE

If you think people are obsessed with playing poker now, you should've seen what it was like back then. Want to play some Texas Hold 'Em? Sit in on a table at the local saloon and try to win some money. "I don't think it was anything people were expecting," laughs producer Irwin Chen. "Hardcore players can just play poker for a while!"

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SWAT 4 EXPANDS

The best of the best gets even better



▲ Trading Spaces: SWAT Edition

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal Games DEVELOPER: Irrational Games GENRE: Tactical Shooter
RELEASE DATE: February 2006

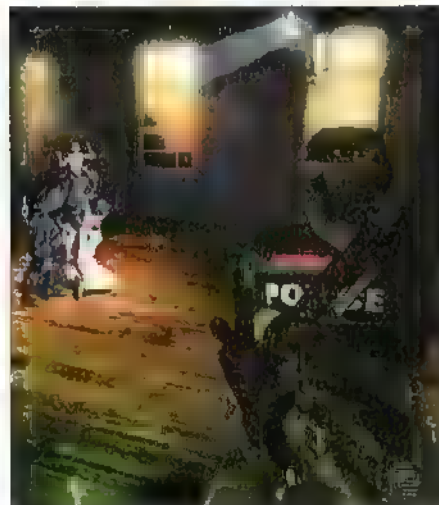
EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

"WE DIDN'T WANT TO SETTLE FOR 'HERE are seven more maps,'" says *SWAT 4* producer Paul Pawlicki while showing CGW some of the new guns and gizmos developer Irrational Games is deploying in its as-yet-untilled expansion to last year's critically acclaimed tactical shooter. Aside from the standard assortment of shiny new

pistols and submachine guns, the add-on outfit your team with long-range grenade launchers and sniper rifles (previously restricted to a squad's designated sharpshooter), night-vision goggles for after-dark assault missions, and conventional glow sticks to serve as markers for allies in co-op mode.

SCENES OF THE CRIME

Several new missions, including a warehouse strewn with catwalks on which snipers can set up camp and a decimated office building where you'll rescue civilians in the aftermath of a devastating bomb blast, introduce desktop do-gooders to *SWAT 4*'s new toys. But, as Pawlicki says, the expansion pack offers far more than a few extra maps. Check out the accompanying sidebar, where we issue an all-points bulletin on the *SWAT 4* expansion's brand-new features. Tom Chick



...the other side of *The Sims 2: Nightlife*.



BULLETINS

We brief you on the *SWAT 4* expansion's special new weapons and tactics

Be advised that suspects will now use blind suppression fire rather than waiting for visual confirmation before shooting.

Suspects who have complied should no longer be considered secure until they've been restrained. Unattended suspects might attempt to flee or secure a nearby weapon.

Be on the lookout for ongoing developments. Witnesses have reported interrelated missions that detail the pursuit of an Eastern European crime lord.

Report to the scene of a drug deal at an arcade and gather evidence before suspects can dispose of it or flee the scene. Use of door wedges on restrooms and exits is advised.

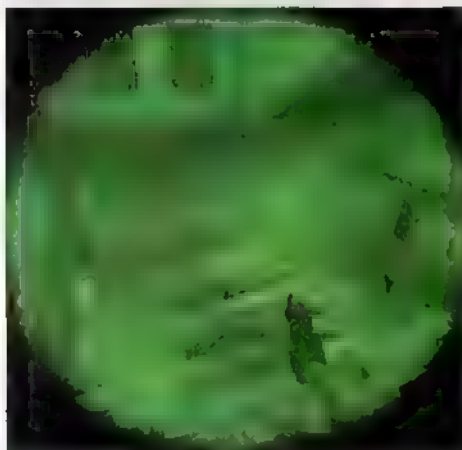
Officers can now issue simultaneous command maneuvers to both red and blue teams with a new command queue system.

Co-op missions supporting up to 10 players can be set up using the same parameters available in single-player games with the quick mission maker, which gives team leaders their choice of locations, enemies, hostages, weapons, and map settings.

Developers report the addition of a new multiplayer mode, yet to be determined. Stand by for further details.

Be advised, multiplayer games now feature asymmetrical weapon distribution. Opposing teams will each have a unique set of weapons.

Voice-issued commands now play a crucial role in both single-player and multiplayer maneuvers.



ONLINE OR OFF, VOICE-ISSUED COMMANDS ARE NOW CRUCIAL.

touching is good



ADVANCE WARE DUAL STRIKE

The twisted Black Hole Army has returned, and this time you'll need both screens as the war rages on two fronts. It's up to you to command your troops on the ground, in the air, and at sea as you engage in dual-screen combat in order to fend off the deadly invasion.

NINTENDO DS



EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY
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Cartoon Violence

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Where Gamers Call Home.



SUPPORT YOUR TROOPS

> "People are fascinated by the perils of historical combat, but few want to throw themselves into harm's way to get a taste," muses Sandy Pitchford, the man behind the *Brothers in Arms* WWII shooters. And despite the carping do-goody editors, he's right—campaign after campaign, the masses have proved their readiness to enlist, provided the war is well done. The message is clear: World War II works. It's a viable theme that supports games in several genres, just like all the space monsters and subterranean menaces that escape the critics' snide comments. In the following pages, we preview the WWII games we're willing to fight for. Plus, we get each game's maker to sound off on why World War II works for them.



DID YOU
KNOW...?

Brothers in Arms'
military consultant
Colonel Antal out-
ranks Medal of
Honor's Captain Dye.

BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

Developer Gearbox is back in flak

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Gearbox Software GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: November 2005

EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON!

NOT EVEN SIX MONTHS HAVE GONE BY SINCE our glowing review of *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*, and the sequel, *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood*, is almost ready for duty. Gearbox President Randy Pitchford assures us, "No, this isn't an expansion, and no, this is not being rushed out the door." We're getting a war chest full of improvements that have apparently been in the works for some time, and while it won't be a full-fledged sequel, *EIB* is a lot more than just an expansion.

For those who don't know of Gearbox's legacy, the company started off by producing the stand-alone *Half-Life* expansions *Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift*, in which you witnessed *Half-Life*'s infamous Black Mesa incident through other people's eyes. *Earned in Blood* takes Pitchford and company back to their roots using this narrative trick...but without the headcrabs.

The new single-player campaign focuses on Cpl. Joseph "Red" Hartssock as he goes from para-

trooper to squad leader to full-on hero during Operation Overlord. *Brothers in Arms* vets will remember the fiery-haired sparkplug as a fire-team leader under Sgt. Matt Baker, BMOC, the guy you controlled the first time around. In *EIB*, Hartssock takes charge of his own squad and links up with the 62nd Airborne in a push to capture St Sauveur-le-Vicomte and beat back the Germans from Brittany. However, in true *Opposing Force* fashion, *EIB*'s campaign also takes Hartssock back through several *Hill 30* missions, which are shown to players through different perspectives. The surreal part is reliving a battle and seeing the guy you were once controlling now serving as an NPC.

Baker never wanted to be a squad leader, but *Brothers in Arms* delivered on squad strategy—a first for a WWII shooter. Now the unique blend of first-person shooting and small-squad strategy is being further refined: You'll still order suppressive fire, frontal assaults, support maneuvers, and, when those pesky Nazis just won't wave the white flag, drive-by shootings with your armored cav. And, of

course, you'll still be hip-deep in the action yourself, dodging potato mashers and smacking Jerry upside the kopf with your rifle butt.

FRONTLINE FIXES

Gearbox is addressing a few issues we had with the original *Brothers in Arms*. First change: larger, more wide-open levels. *Hill 30*, while fun, felt too constricted, as if you were being railroaded into one of several set paths. "We wanted to address that," says Pitchford. "Most maps [in *EIB*] are about 50 percent larger." And some new maps feature destructible walls and other back-alley shortcuts that should provide a greater sense of freedom, not to mention replay value. Although there are fewer levels this time around, the campaign is much bigger than *Hill 30*'s due to the increased gaming real estate. Hey, so long as we're no longer penned in by knee-high fences, we're happy.

The new skirmish mode takes particular advantage of *EIB*'s larger maps. This mode presents a series of "minicampaigns" playable from either



"RED" GETS REAL

As forward-looking as the gameplay was in the original *Brothers in Arms*, the graphics looked a little...off. We can't really call out anything major, since Gearbox covered things up with a screen filter—but now there's nothing to hide. Thanks to an improved graphics engine, the number of polygons on every object has more than doubled (2.3 times greater, to be exact), and the texture detail is 16 times greater in *EIB* than in *Road to Hill 30*.



BEFORE > AFTER

WHY WWII?

"Some people dream about being a space marine and saving the world from aliens. Some people dream about being a wizard fighting goblins. Some people dream about real things—amazing, horrible, and memorable things—things like what the 101st Airborne actually did on D-Day, as portrayed in *Brothers in Arms*. It's interesting to use our interactive medium to re-create and relive meaningful history."

—President Randy Pitchford, Gearbox

TACTICS 101: COL. ANTAL'S GUIDE TO ASS-KICKING

"Tactics haven't changed since the time cavemen hunted woolly mammoth," says Col. John F. Antal, military advisor and historical director for Gearbox. "Find 'em, fix 'em, flank 'em, and finish 'em." The colonel shows us how to do it properly in *Brothers in Arms*:

➤ **Earned in Blood's** new A.I. system analyzes tactical situations and attempts to flank the player's squad. In order to win, the player must use realistic tactics as epitomized by the "four F's." First, find the enemy and determine the situation. Then, fix the enemy by suppressing all visible units with overwhelming firepower. After the enemy is suppressed, the player must act quickly to flank the enemy. Finally, the player must use his squad to take advantage of the flanking maneuver and rapidly finish the enemy. Using these tactics, the player can gain the advantage he [or she] needs in order to attain victory.



▲ In this scenario, there is a German squad consisting of two fire teams at the end of the courtyard. The enemy has opportunities to flank left or right; if the player doesn't use proper tactics, then the new enemy A.I. will seize the opportunity to flank and finish the player.



▲ Here, the player is making a mistake by having both his fire and assault teams suppressing only one of the two German teams. The icon above the suppressed enemy team is gray, whereas the unsuppressed enemy team on the left shows a red icon.



▲ The new enemy A.I. system analyzes this situation and recognizes an opportunity to flank the player with its unsuppressed fire team. With the player's suppressive fire falling only on the enemy team to the right, the enemy team on the left is free to maneuver against the player.



▲ In this image, the enemy has successfully flanked the player and will quickly kill everyone in the player's squad unless immediate action is taken. The player can avoid defeats like this by employing the four F's and staying on the offensive.



▲ Notice how the player uses effective fire and maneuver tactics, and has both enemy teams suppressed by his squad.



▲ Using proper tactics, the player fixes the enemy and then orders one team to assault down the right wall to flank the suppressed enemy.



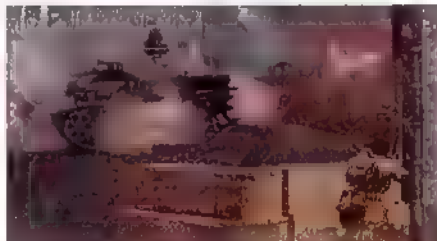
▲ The enemy realizes that they are outflanked and tries to flee—but the player has used superior tactics, keeping up the momentum of the assault to ultimately win the engagement.

the Axis or Allied perspective. While it doesn't feature a story per se, it is based on historically accurate situations from the *Brothers in Arms* source materials and proceeds in logical progression. But skirmish isn't a mere extension of the single-player mode: You'll get to play the skirmish campaigns both alongside and against your buddies in multiplayer mode. That's right, kids: honest-to-goodness co-op.

And you'll need all the help you can get against the new A.I. advancements that have been made for the CPU-controlled stooges. Gearbox has addressed another complaint by giving the A.I.

greater mobility and the ability to react dynamically to the player's tactical decisions. "In the first game, we spent a lot of effort building the Allied squads and their A.I.," says Pitchford. "In *Earned in Blood*, we really invested in the enemy A.I. Now they aren't just going to be static, waiting for you to fix 'em and flank 'em. They're going to be trying to maneuver on you." Of course, final tweaks are still needed for the enemy A.I. to be truly intelligent, because in our hands-on test session, we easily mowed the Nazis down on our second try. Pitchford assures us that there's still plenty of time for Gearbox to finish the job.

For now, there's no need to reinvent the half-track. Gearbox has maintained the core of *Hill 30* and built a lot more around it in *Earned in Blood*. But if the developer doesn't release another semi-sequel in six months, we won't know what to do with ourselves. **Eric Neigher** (with suppressive fire from Darren Gladstone)



SMACK JERRY UPSIDE THE KOPF WITH YOUR RIFLE BUTT.

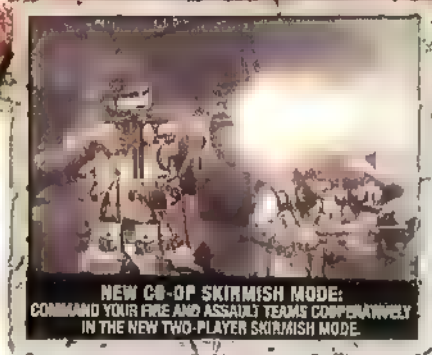
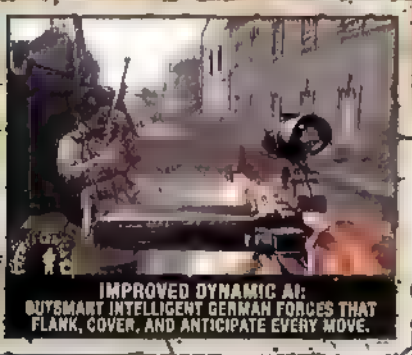
TAKING COMMAND ISN'T EASY.

TAKING THE CONSEQUENCES IS EVEN HARDER.

1944 St. Sauveur, D-Day +10

I've been out of Baker's shadow for no more than three days now and already I'm feeling the weight of my fear. The fear that around every corner somebody's lying in wait. The fear that any wrong choice could end up killing what I'm trying to save. Well, somebody's got to lead this fight. And if I call this right, my men — the men who have fought next to me — will get out of this hell alive.

*Red
6/16*



BROTHERS ★ IN ARMS ★ ★ EARNED IN BLOOD ★

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PlayStation 2



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COMPANY OF

Fall in, soldier

Structures in the game take damage just as real ones would. Blow a hole in the side of a building, and you've got a few less enemies to worry about—or a handy new camping spot for your own sniper.

EXCLUSIVES THQ • R. M. • Rellie Entertainment GENRE RTS RELEASE DATE February 2006

EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON!

WORLD WAR II STRATEGY TITLES TYPICALLY tend to be dull history lessons in disguise... which is great if you're into that sort of thing. For the rest of us—your everyday RTS fans—it complicates things. In short, we want our WWII games to be more *Saving Private Ryan* and less *Mr. Freedman's World History 101*. It seems the folks at Relic Entertainment (creators of *Impossible Creatures*, *Homeworld*, and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*) feel the same way, as they've already spent a considerable amount of time coming up with an elegant solution to the problem: *Company of Heroes*.

WHY WWII?

"When we were about to start our next big project, we sat down and asked ourselves, 'What's next? What game will allow us to push real soldiers, real battlefields, and wrap [it all] around a cinematic experience?' The answer was World War II. True, there have been a number of WWII RTS games, but none has captured the visceral cinematic experience that players have come to expect from movies like *Saving Private Ryan* or [the HBO series] *Band of Brothers*. In terms of the genre, we feel we can give WWII the Relic touch and give players the definitive WWII real-time strategy experience."

—Lead designer Josh Mosqueira, Relic

"Too many WWII RTS [games] are academic in nature, focusing on detail [instead of] the overall experience," says lead designer Josh Mosqueira. This isn't to say that *Company of Heroes* will skimp on the detail; it just focuses on what's really important. For starters, your troops aren't the robotically obedient suicide squads of other RTS titles; instead, they're more akin to living, breathing soldiers. Units take it upon themselves to take cover on the battlefield, lay down suppression fire, and flank the enemy to the best

targeting you from that abandoned building? Fire a barrage of ordnance at it and blow him to kingdom come. Or better yet, just roll a King Tiger tank through the whole damn thing. In either case, the collateral damage starts to pile up, and thanks to Relic's brand-new Essence engine (not to mention Havok 3.0 physics), even the wreckage exhibits realistic behavior. Instead of melting into the ground as in any other RTS, a burned-out building in *Company of Heroes* breaks down according to the severity and location of the damage—and

➤ YOUR TROOPS AREN'T THE ROBOTICALLY OBEDIENT SUICIDE SQUADS OF OTHER RTS TITLES.

of their ability. Squad leaders bark orders and use hand signals to communicate maneuvers. When the going gets tough, endangered troops react as real people would: They panic. The range of intelligent behavior that *Heroes'* A.I. exhibits goes well toward establishing a highly tactical style of play, and the emotional responses of your men—conveyed through more than 2,000 unique animations per unit—make it feel like the real deal every step of the way.

FIRE IN THE HOLE

Environments are another key factor when it comes to realism and tactical planning. Everything on the battlefield is potentially important: Objects—wrecked cars, rubble, and whatnot—serve as cover, building interiors offer vantage points for long-range units, and everything on the map is destructible. Sniper

the wreckage becomes yet another strategically important terrain feature.

RADIO SILENCE

Based on the brief demonstrations we've seen of *Company of Heroes'* gameplay and its built-in moviemaker tool (which allows you to stage your own scripted battles inside the game engine and then share them with other players online), we're hyped to see the finished product. Relic still hasn't divulged any in-depth information about playable factions (which we're guessing include Americans, Germans, and possibly British or Japanese), specific units, the economic system, or the single- and multiplayer gameplay modes—but if it can deliver on the promise of an advanced World War II strategy game that doesn't put us to sleep, then this is one war we'll be lining up to enlist in. /Ryan Scott

HEROES

Company of Heroes doesn't skimp on what fans want out of an action-packed WWII game—which is to say, lots of awesome explosions.

Your boys take cover behind parked tanks and other terrain features, closing in on the enemy while ducking deadly return fire.

Tanks are a force to fear—you won't take down Sherman tanks with simple assault rifles here.



Tanks aren't the only terrors on wheels.



War is hell—and *Company of Heroes* puts you right in the middle of it.



Squads take cover to avoid bullets, but not everyone makes it out alive.



Rooftops provide excellent vantage points and increased protection for gunners...that is, until the other guys break out the really big guns.

"WE'RE NOT AIMING TO MAKE THE BEST PERIOD SHOOTER, BUT THE BEST SHOOTER, PERIOD." —INFINITY WARD PRESIDENT GRANT COLLIER



Not shown: The soldier continues to fight even after taking several critical hits, crawling on all fours if he's down.

CALL OF DUTY 2

Shooting for the moon

PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

"WE'RE NOT AIMING TO MAKE THE BEST period shooter," says Grant Collier, president of *Call of Duty 2* developer Infinity Ward, "but the best shooter, period. With *Call of Duty*, we weren't matched up with non-WWII shooters. The question was, 'What are you doing differently than *Medal of Honor*?' And frankly, we smoked *Medal of Honor*. Now our targets are the big PC first-person-shooter franchises."

COD2 certainly is tenser than most space-marine-against-space-monster shooters. Possibly better than the sum of its bullet points (smarter A.I., more immersive atmosphere, and all-around authenticity) and as potentially top-notch as its talent pool (Infinity Ward tapped film composer Graeme Revell of *Sin City* fame, along with actors from the HBO series *Band of Brothers*), it's stressful in the way it should be. The sudden brutality and shock of battle, the walls of white fire and thick streams of black smoke, put a premium on panic and frenzy. "Stalingrad [one stop on

our hands-on tour through five famous battles] was brutal," Collier says. "Lines blurred, and you'd have situations where it went house by house or building by building—the first two floors are German occupied, and the next two are Russian occupied...real chaotic."

Even if you lose your wits amid the rumbling rhythm of explosions, your whip-smart squads of soldiers won't. "*Call of Duty* was linear, a roller-coaster ride that people loved," Collier explains. "[Ally] A.I. always knew where you were and whether you'd take a certain path from point A to point B. Now that you can tackle objectives in any order you'd like, the A.I. has to actually see and hear you. It's aware of its surroundings—so if it sees you attacking from a certain area, it'll identify safe spots, move to cover, and fight with you. If you press it in a long battle, it'll retreat, and if it comes across other allies, it'll say 'follow me' and assemble an impromptu posse."

—Shawn Elliott



▲ *COD2*'s multiplayer modes play it safe. That means none of the *United Offensive* expansion pack's tanks, trucks, and artillery.

WHY WWII?

"It's a classic conflict of good versus evil; it was often up close and personal. It was the first modern global war, with extensive use of machine guns, tanks, widespread bombing, naval combat, and even nuclear weapons. Every country had some kind of stake in it, and so it's something that speaks to everyone. Why not WWII?"

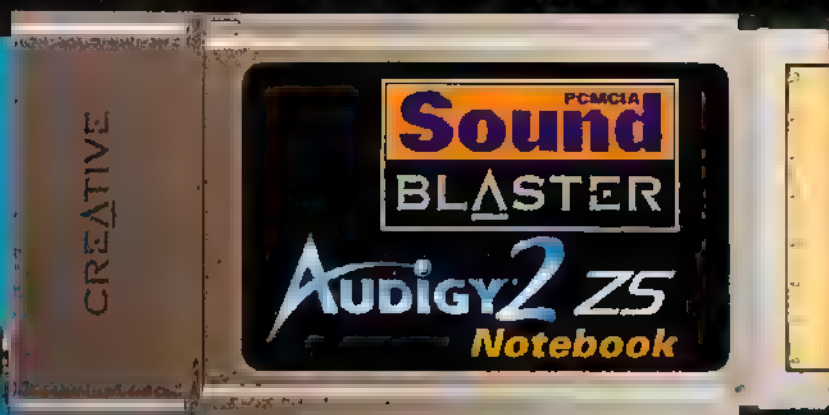
—President Grant Collier, Infinity Ward

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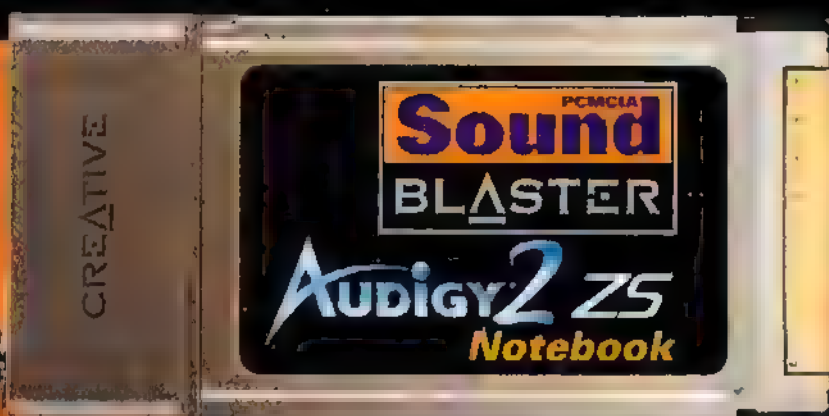


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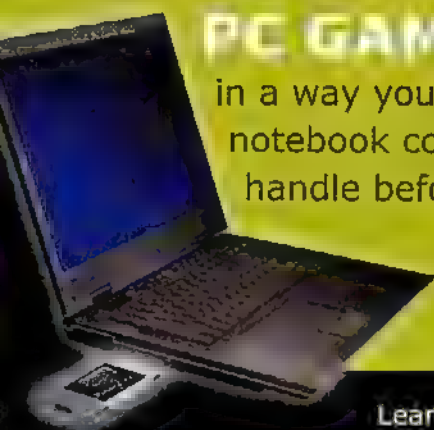


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WAR FRONT: TURNING POINT

World War 2

DEVELOPER: CDV Software DEVELOPER: Digital Reality GENRE: RTS #1: Easy DATE: June 2005

IT MAY BE SET DURING WORLD WAR II, BUT that doesn't mean a game necessarily needs to stick to the script. True, we all know how it turned out, but CDV's *War Front: Turning Point* is a fresh take that adds several "small" twists. Here's one: Hitler is assassinated in 1940.

SECRET WARS

Digital Reality—yes, the same guys working on the genre-busting action-RTS *Ghost Wars*—has taken all the history books in its office and ripped out everything post-1940. You start off with your basic World War II backstory and authentic weaponry, but then, sometime early in the game, Hitler gets assassinated. *Awesome.*

Following the assassination, a "more benign leadership" takes over in Germany. Seeing that the war could turn against them, Germany redoubles its efforts on experimental technology, and much of the secret weaponry that was in development during the war is finally put to use. Operation Sea Lion is successful, England is knocked out of the war, and then it's down to the United States versus Germany, in a battle that rages into the late 1940s. This complicates matters with another interesting plot twist, as a new

cold war blossoms in this strange, new take on World War II.

WEIRD SCIENCE

As technology advances, you'll start to see experimental weaponry that was under development by the end of the war. Germany's ME-262 rocket planes and experimental V-2 rockets are just the tip of the war machine: The Russians develop a behemoth tank that has multiple turrets, and U.S. scientists finish their work on an "earthquake bomb" (which actually was on the drawing board at the time). While CDV is loath to reveal many details this early on, we did manage to drag a couple other secrets out into the open: The game will feature jetpack soldier units, giant zeppelin blimps, bridge-building units, and new experimental weaponry based on actual working designs.

CDV spokesman Mario Kroll says, "Typical World War II RTS games [published by CDV and others] are too esoteric for mainstream gamers. *War Front* will look great and remain accessible to a more casual audience." But that doesn't mean Digital Reality is skimping on the actual strategy; the game is still going to have a ludicrous amount of detail—both graphically and

statistically—for those hardcore enough to dig for it. Speaking of digging, we like the 5-on-5 player multiplayer mode that involves the various sides not knowing the specific objectives of the other players, with each potentially pursuing one another while fulfilling their own agendas.

And, in a small nod to the classic action game *Beachhead*, there's also a shooting gallery minigame. You'll control the action from the usual general's-eye view, but you'll have the option to jump into strategically placed bunkers and blast away at incoming targets from a first-person perspective. You won't be able to freely jump inside and directly operate the various vehicles—which is a bit of a letdown—but the creative use of actual and alternate historical events is reason enough to join this battle.

—Darren Gladstone

WHY WWII?



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DO UWE BOLL?

Has director Uwe Boll (*House of the Dead*, *Dungeon Siege*) approached you about making a BF2 movie?

MIKE DORAN: [Laughing] No. No, not yet. The movies that fans make with the battle recorder, however, might make for more humorous viewing.

POST-MORTEM

By the time you're back in the office, the plane will be water-cooler stories over the office. I'll be plotting, thinking how safe, when I steer my plane through him... and I'll be wondering how to sleepwalk into work on three hours of shut-eye for the next morning. What's next for land-sea-and-air shooter *Battlefield 2*? We asked developer Mike Doran for newly declassified intel.



BATTLEFIELD 2 DEVELOPERS RATE THEIR OWN GAME

CGW: It's gone from a group of guys who were nowhere to blockbuster developer. What lessons would you take away from *BF2*?
MD: From the get-go, and all during *BF1942*'s development, we knew we were working on something special. When *BF2* was first set down to search for the next generation of Battlefield, we knew that new vehicles weren't enough. It was through these meetings that we set the foundations for strategic teamplay, as well as the ranking system. So yeah, it's fair to say that we had high expectations for *BF2* from the very beginning.

CGW: What lessons did you learn from (*Battlefield 1942* mod) *Desert Combat* and *Battlefield Vietnam*, and how is *BF2* a better

game because of it?

MD: *BF2* benefited immensely from community feedback. We've also learned loads about what needs to be ready when a game of this type ships—from Linux support on down to network code testing on consumer-level hardware. At the end of the day, I'd say that one of the biggest lessons we learned from the *Battlefield* franchise is that realism is overrated. Once upon a time, *BF1942* was supposed to become more realistic. We joke about it now, but I personally cringe when I think how that might have turned out.

CGW: What parts of the project are you proudest of?

MD: Beyond the core vehicle stuff, I'd say the infantry experience, especially compared to *BF1942*'s. It's a direct result of the team developing the squad-based gameplay that everyone wanted. Also, the stat-tracking system really came together, making it a rewarding experience for everyone.

FROM THE GET-GO, WE KNEW WE WERE WORKING ON SOMETHING SPECIAL.



a special version of [BF1942 mod] *Desert Combat*. While it was pretty fun, most folks still preferred to hit "e" and then parachute to wherever they wanted to go. As for the hovercraft, we cut that because only one or two levels featured it, and we weren't getting the bang for the buck in terms of work involved/lun factor.

CGW: What are the odds we'll see either of them in an expansion after *Special Forces*?

MD: No comment.

CGW: ...and CTF and objective modes?

MD: We've found that 90 percent of the *Battlefield 1942* community plays conquest, so we cut CTF and objective modes to focus on polishing other parts of the game.

CGW: North Korean newspapers pointed fingers at *Ghost Recon 2*'s near-future plot. Has Beijing commented on BF2's Chinese

real life? It isn't pretty. Sillyness aside, we've seen and experienced the problem and agree that it's no fun. At this point, we can't comment on the time line for the next patch release, but sure, it's something on our radar.

CGW: What's your take on sites like *bf2slawed.net* that let players look at the competition's stats? Why not build/patch a similar browser into *Battlefield HQ*?

MD: This is something we're keeping our eye on. We think it's a natural win to be able to browse the competition's stats in-game.

CGW: Name a few of your best *Battlefield* mo-ments, stuff you simply have to see to believe.

MD: The first that comes to mind is the missile flying clear through a *Blackhawk*'s cabin without hitting the airframe. People swore that the

BATTLEFIELD 2

CGW: That's an understatement! With stat tracking it's almost like leveling up in an MMO. Have you considered taking the service a step further, perhaps adding the ability to personalize your soldier's appearance?

MD: Actually, at one point in time we had planned on having visual unlocks as well as weapon unlocks; we wanted to give gamers the ability to customize their characters extensively. Sadly, that didn't work out, due to technical complications and the amount of memory it would've consumed.

CGW: Previews showed soldiers fast roping from helicopters. Advertisements promised a hovercraft. What happened?

MD: We tried the helicopter rappelling thing when we were working with the trauma team to prototype

Battlefield 2 features in

campaign?

MD: That's classified information that I can't even fill my family in on.

CGW: Fair enough. Certain out-of-the-way crates on Mideast Coalition maps are packed with pink teddy bears—sly commentary on the search for WMDs, or something else? What other secrets haven't we seen?

MD: Let's see...from what I remember, there are DICE T-shirts on clotheslines in certain levels; there's a spot where, if you shoot the water, fish fly out; and there are some posters that show *BF1942*'s box art. At one point, we even wanted to make the wheelbarrow a drivable vehicle...

CGW: Speaking of vehicles...slightly scrapping one is fatal (sort of like keeling over after nicking a side mirror), which not only rules out wing walking and tank riding, but makes it too easy to kill teammates. Any plans to patch the problem?

MD: Have you been winged by a Hummer in

footage we caught of that was scripted, but I can assure you that it was pure chance. Also, Ben Smith—one of the guys on our production crew—discovered that if you parachute into another player, the impact of your body against his actually kills 'im. That's made for a memorable moment or two. Another one of my personal favorites is what I call the ultimate shame kill. It's neither a knife to the back nor death by electric shock paddle—I come up on a prone enemy sniper, crouch behind him, and slowly nudge him off of a building so that he plummets to his death. Unfortunately, it's not called out on the scoreboard, but there's something immensely satisfying about it all the same. And it's great for grieving AFK teammates on carriers, too.

CGW: Sounds like you should start hosting battle-recorder movies of the month....

MD: That's a great idea. We'd just need someone who watches every single submission to pick one. /Shawn Elliott



BATTLEFIELD 2: SPECIAL FORCES

The first BF2 expansion is all about the stealth

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: DICE GENRE: Action RELEASE DATE: November 2005

PREVIEW

THINK INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS IN BIG BATTLES and more minute-to-minute one-upmanship. Infantry-focused *Battlefield 2* expansion *Special Forces* takes a cloak-and-dagger turn, giving the man on the ground more moments to shine in a game where tanks and attack choppers traditionally steal the thunder. We look at three ways the add-on will change the way we think about war when it deploys this November.

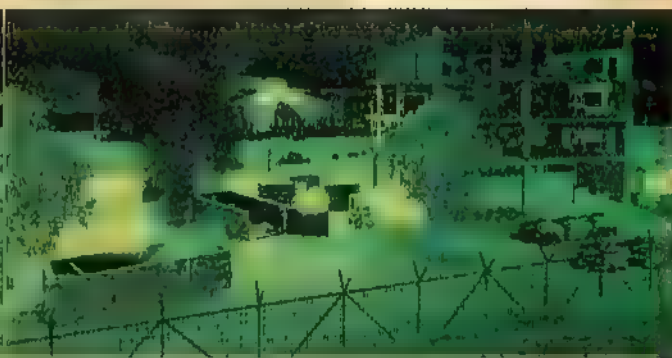


Trash the supports that hold a zip line taut, and anyone on it falls to their death.



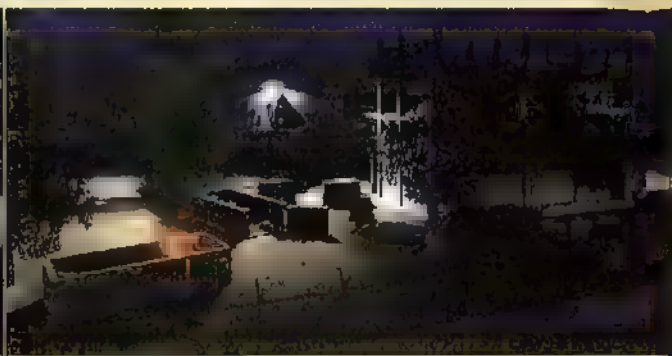
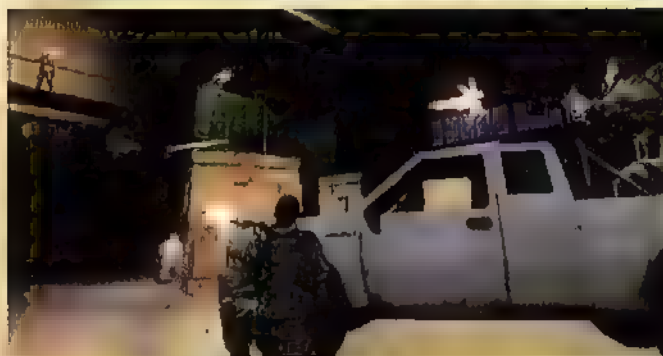
GET-AROUND GANG

Special Forces' squads of SEALs, SAS, and Spetnaz stray from the tried-and-true routes that infantry ordinarily takes. "Zip lines and grappling hooks help you travel across maps quietly and quickly," says producer David Yee. "By using these tools, you can take shortcuts over, across, and around obstacles. At times, a foot soldier can move as fast as a vehicle." And while EA says we'll be able to harpoon enemies with the hook, we'd have settled for *Splinter Cell*-style play in 64-man matches (and shooting entire teams as they slide past our sights like ducks in a row).



NIGHT FIGHTERS

What's a secret war without shadows? Many of *Special Forces*' missions go down after dark, so night-vision goggles (NVGs) prove indispensable. "With night vision, we're creating a balance between being able to see in complete darkness [and] not being able to see in bright light," Yee says. "In reality, NVGs adjust to rapid changes in light level, but for gameplay [purposes], we wanted to make sure that there was a trade-off to keep the goggles from being too powerful." As for the source of that sudden brightness, blame it on flashbang grenades, another new widget for squads to work with.



PERFECT PLAYGROUNDS

"We've specifically designed eight new maps around the game's gadgets," Yee explains, "meaning that the use of darkness and light, vertical height, and horizontal distance are all built to be strategic considerations around the control points." In other words, *Special Forces*' densely developed settings (which include an airport and a missile-launch site) encourage both mobility and spy-versus-spy tactics with a mix of lit parking lots and pitch-black back alleys.

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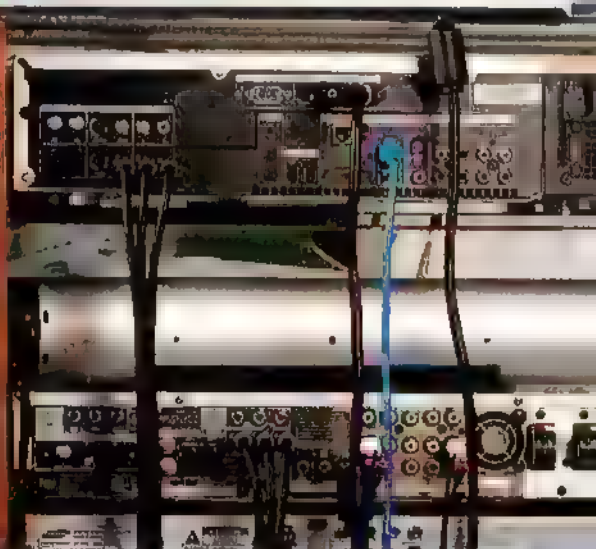
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■ THREADS

Hot Coffee T-shirt

\$15 THINKGEEK.COM

You liked *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, you loved the risqué "Hot Coffee" minigame, now buy the T-shirt! According to a vast array of pundits ("cough" Jack Thompson "cough"

ambulance chaser "cough"), the gaming industry is corrupting the youth of America, so parents should definitely watch for the hidden "Tide" mod that'll actually make you take off the shirt.



■ BOOK

Everything Bad Is Good for You

\$16 AMAZON.COM

After reading our interview with author Steven Johnson (page 20)—you read that, right?—you probably made immediate arrangements to get a copy of this book. It

offers fascinating, intelligent, easily graspable arguments for why videogames, among other things, are actually—gasp—good for you.



■ MUSIC

Paul Anka: Rock Swings

\$18 AMAZON.COM

While Paul Anka is among the last of the living Rat Pack-era singers, this collection of covers elevates him to the top of the magna-cheese heap.

When he croons "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "Eye of the Tiger," Valente practically drips from the speakers.



■ MOVIE

Serenity

\$9 MOVIE TICKET

We can't fault you for never seeing the television brilliance that was *Firefly*, since Fox hid it in the 8 p.m. Friday death slot, but a second

chance awaits you in the form of the DVD box set—the perfect (but not mandatory) precursor to viewing the film. Check out the *Serenity* trailer at www.serenitymovie.com.

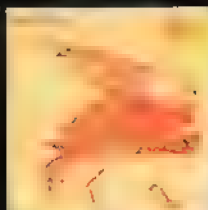


■ NINJAS!

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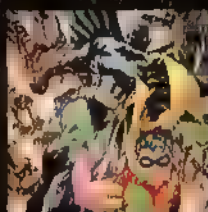
■ MUSIC

The Bravery

\$11 AMAZON.COM

Must every current band sound like it stepped straight out of the '80s? Infuse a little of The Killers with some Dapche Mode and you

get close to The Bravery's sound—it's an acquired taste, but it doesn't take long to develop a hankering for it. Start with a few trippy electronic tracks like "Unconditional," "Out of Line," and "Fearless."



■ PULP

All-Star Batman and Robin, the Boy Wonder

\$3, DCCOMICS.COM

Since the release of *Batman Begins*, Ryan has spent his spare time piecing together office staplers to make a utility

belt. Oddly, no one on staff has volunteered yet for Boy Wonder duty. Still, we're all digging this awesome new series, which partners comic-book greats who together offer new takes on classic *Batman* tales. The series kicks off with work from Jim Lee and Frank "Sin City" Miller, which leads us to...



■ DVD

Sin City

\$16 AMAZON.COM

Any comic-book-based movie that's storyboarded according to the original comic-book panels gets instant props from us. We're impressed by

the unique aesthetics of this film, and doubly so by the fact that it stays totally true to the comics. So long as you blank out Michael Madsen's wooden performance (although it's counterbalanced rather well by Jessica Alba's turn as a stripper), we say that sin is in.



■ BOOK

I, Fatty

\$10 AMAZON.COM

Before OJ and MJ (Jacko, that is), there was Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. This book takes a fascinating look at the first big celeb to fall victim to a media circus. Offering a look into the original king of comedy's screwy childhood, struggles with addiction, and the scandal and trial that ended his career, *I, Fatty* isn't exactly "ha-ha" funny, but it is captivating.

POCKET CHANGE: \$5.00

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games

	PUBLISHER
187 Ride or Die	Ubisoft
Bat on Soldier: Blood Sport	2K Games
Blitzkrieg II	CDV Software
Dragonshard	Atari
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Funcom
EverQuest II: Desert of Flames	NCsoft
Fable: The Lost Chapters	Microsoft
Indigo Prophecy	Atari
Myst V: End of Ages	Ubisoft
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ubisoft
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight
The Suffering: Ties That Bind	Midway
Ultimate Spider-Man	Activision
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Winter Assault	THQ
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	Activision
OCTOBER 2005	
25 to Life	Exios
Age of Empires III	Microsoft
Auto Assault	NCsoft
City of Villains	NCsoft
Commandos Strike Force	Exios
F.E.A.R.	VU Games
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	Midway
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
The Movies	Activision
TimeShift	Atari
NOVEMBER 2005	
Civilization IV	2K Games
Conflict: Global Terror	2K Games
Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach	MM
Gun	Activision
Hammer & Sickle	CDV Software
King Kong	Ubisoft
Payout Poker and Casino	Namco
Star Wars Battlefront II	LucasArts
The Matrix: Path of Neo	Atari
FALL 2005	
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	Ubisoft
Call of Duty 2	Activision
Evil Dead Regeneration	THQ
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion	Sega
Stacked With Daniel Negreanu	Myelin Media
Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse	Aspyr
The Sims 2: Nightlife	Electronic Arts
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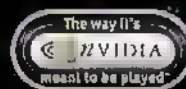
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FULL STEAM

AN EXCLUSIVE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH THE DEVELOPERS AT VALVE

➤ NO ONE DENIES THE GREATNESS of *Half-Life 2*, Valve Software's 2004 sequel to its sci-fi/shooter classic, but its cliffhanger ending left many gamers desperate for more info. Gordon Freeman has once again saved the world, destroying the citadel, headquarters of the evil alien Combine striving to enslave humanity. He survives because he's rescued by his arch-nemesis, the enigmatic "GMan." Why? We do not know. Gordon's close compadre, resistance fighter Alyx Vance, was last seen shielding her eyes from the blast of the citadel explosion. Is she still alive? Again, we do not know. And that's

just how the developers at Valve like it.

"When we introduced *Half-Life*, the first questions everyone had were 'How many weapons?' and 'How many levels?'" says programmer/designer Robin Walker. "Now

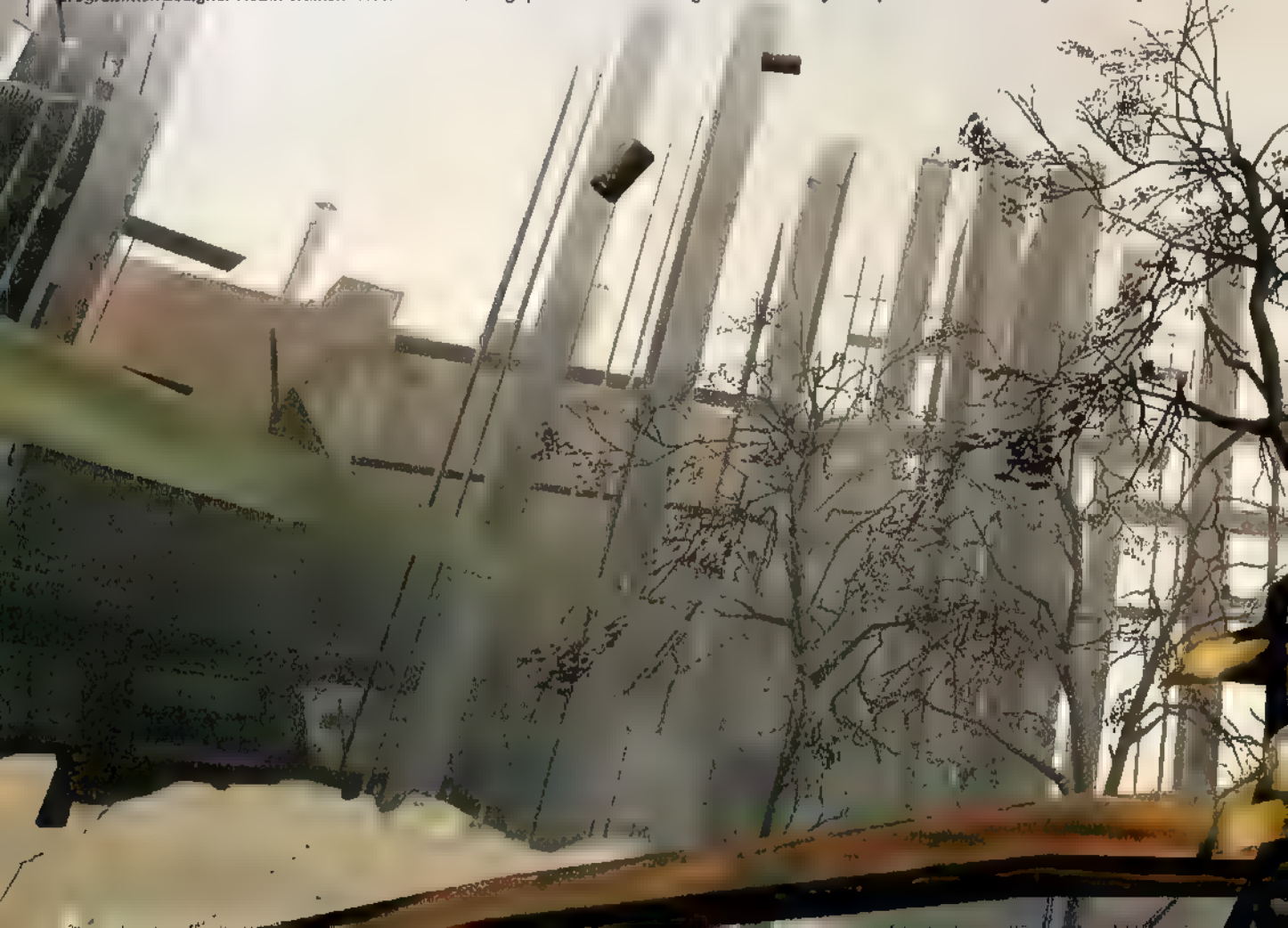
when people ask us about *Aftermath* [the next episode in the series], they're wondering, 'What happened to Alyx? What happened after the citadel?' And we love it. It means that *Half-Life 2*'s story was successful. We enjoy answering those questions far more than those about the number of new weapons an expansion adds."

Truth is, *Half-Life* elevated gamers' expectations overnight. Whether it's with game design, storytelling, or online experimentation, developer Valve continues to venture into uncharted territory. Most revolutionary of all is Steam, Valve's digital distribution service.

CGW took a hard-line stance on Steam when *Half-Life 2* shipped. While the process was painless for folks who ordered and activated the game online, people who bought a boxed copy at stores found themselves waiting in a never-ending queue to activate the game before they

could play. Thankfully, Valve ironed out the big bugs, creating a service we can comfortably stand by. And now, it's all starting to make sense. Lost Coast, a free tech demo in the form of a level, will be available by the time you read this. Similarly, WWII shooter *Day of Defeat: Source* should be suited up and ready for action, with *Aftermath*, which chronicles the further adventures of *Half-Life* hero Gordon Freeman, hitting soon after. And by distributing developer Ritual's *Sin Episodes*, Valve is about to play a new role, that of virtual publisher.

We sat down with Mr. Freeman's forward-thinking handlers—writer/director Marc Laidlaw, programmer/designer Robin Walker, and Valve co-founder and managing director Gabe Newell—to find out how it all fits together. As for what happened to Alyx after the citadel collapsed...we'll have to get back to you on that. >



VALVE

COVER STORY

Y AHEAD

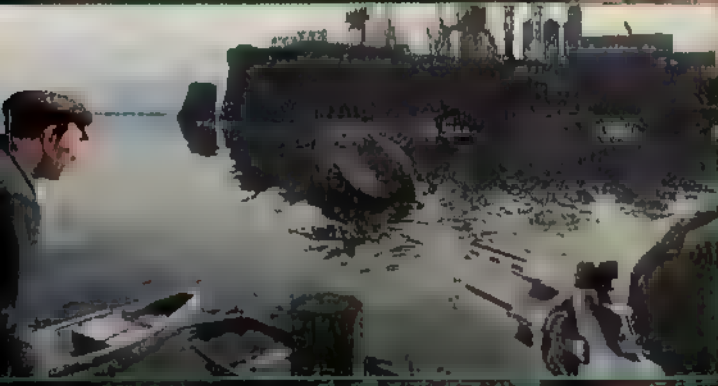
BY SHAWN
ELLIOTT
AND DARREN
GLADSTONE

How *Half-Life* and Valve Software
continue to change the way the
game is played





A single light source illuminates all of Lost Coast: the sun.



If the Aftermath of HL2's novel, the ending of HL2's novel, the ending of HL2's novel.

DO UWE BELL? Has director Uwe Boll (House of the Dead, Dungeon Siege) approached you about making an HL2 movie?

MARC LAIDLAW, WRITER/DESIGNER: It happens to everyone, I take it. We like being mugged.

CGW: The suspense is killing us. What happens after *Half-Life 2*?

Marc Laidlaw: [Laughs] Are you the guys who called me at home to say I had broken your brains?

Robin Walker: I always liked what Marc has said about how, to him, *Half-Life 2* was a complete package, that we promised the player

everything from the get-go. From when you first see it at the train station, the citadel is clearly set up to be your goal: where you're going to go and where it will all end.

ML: We felt like the ending of *Half-Life 2* just couldn't be better. Especially in comparison to the ending of *Half-Life*, where there was no direct connection at the end with anything you'd seen at the beginning. You never knew when you ended up there; it wasn't inevitable, and it seemed like a last-minute decision to tack on an ending and try to make sense of it. This time, we intentionally set out to make a complete experience from the first moment...the ending is implicit in the beginning. Another thing we did was provide playable "chapters." When I'm reading a book, I enjoy the sense of anticipation that comes with knowing the end is close because you can literally see how many pages away from the ending you are. So with our visual version of chapters, we thought you'd similarly say to yourselves, "Here it comes; I'm at the end."

And I think that a few people reacted to this feeling of abruptness, this sense that they were being toyed with, and that not everything had been solved in the same way. But the point was not simply the circularity of it and the way in which it all fed into itself, but that—like I told the guy who called me in the middle of the night, going on and on about the end of the game—it's a game. And we wanted the story to work in the same way that you're solving puzzles throughout the game. Whether you're trying to figure out how to stack cinder blocks on a teeter-totter to get where you've gotta go, or wondering why you're in a specific situation, or asking what other characters mean to you—you're solving something. We're not making a movie. We're not making a book. We're making a game, and its story should work in the same way as the other elements in it. So while I understand that some people felt they were missing a moment where we see how it all fits together, it's also an important lead-in and an opening for *Aftermath* and



"THE ENDING OF HALF-LIFE 2 COULDN'T BE BETTER." -WRITER/DESIGNER MARC LAIDLAW

LOST COAST

Inside the free *Half-Life 2* level

WE'RE TIPTOEING ALONG A TOO-TINY EDGE WHEN WE HEAR A gunshot hovering overhead. We see the path we're supposed to take and stop to snag some extra health for what's ahead...but what's ahead isn't the helicopter we're anticipating. Instead, we find a floating informational icon that cues programmer/designer Robin Walker's voice when clicked. "We've started up the sound effects to set you on edge and create a sense of urgency," he says, "even though you're safe until you advance and trigger the assault." If you'd rather a magician not reveal the tricks of his trade, don't try free *Half-Life 2* level Lost Coast's did-you-know director's mode (available soon via Steam to *HL2* owners with over a gig of RAM and either ATI's X800 or Nvidia's 6600 videocard).

"It's an experiment," says Walker. "We've always thought that gamers would appreciate getting a better understanding of what we go through to build our games, and one of the things we'd like them to see is the level of intentionality behind it all. It's a continuation of what we've done with *Counter-Strike: Source*, where each day we showed screenshots of a map from different angles, eventually making a sort of stop-motion movie of the whole thing being developed. Here, instead of separating the commentary from the mission, we're incorporating it into the game itself."

The results are spot on: Not only are the bonuses optional (on a comment-by-comment basis), they're interactive in ways that DVD chatovers aren't. Clicking on some icons, for instance, seizes control of the camera to show off this or that detail; while clicking another icon splits the screen down the middle to demon-

strate the difference made by a new technology trick Valve is using, dubbed high dynamic range (HDR) lighting. "If something on the screen is 20 percent reflected, such as wet sand, then the maximum reflected brightness can only be 20 percent of the maximum brightness of your monitor," explains Walker. "HDR's more accurate simulation of white ensures that the sun's reflection on wet sand appears as it would in the real world, which could potentially use 100 percent of the maximum monitor brightness. HDR uses bloom to simulate white that is beyond 100 percent of a monitor's max." Solence adds, Lost Coast looks like, outdoing even the Doom 3 engine in natural environments with convincing light that both creeps over corners and approximates the human eye's habit of adjusting to sudden changes in brightness. The neatest bit, however, is that despite being an interactive tech demo, Lost Coast contributes something, however small, to the *Half-Life* legacy, explaining how head crabs overran HL-2's Ravenholm terror town.

"I think that what we're going to try as time goes on—whether it's new free content or content we're charging for—is to continually add to the technology and the story together, advance both together," says Walker. "So in *Aftermath*, for instance, we're implementing new AI, for working with allies and collaborative action, which advances the narrative and introduces new technical tricks. The way we built the engine is that it's always going to be getting better. And our hope is that we don't even have to say, 'OK, that's the end of this engine. It's going to forever be Source, and Source is always going to get better.'"

WE'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT GAMERS WOULD APPRECIATE GETTING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF OUR GAMES.

—PROGRAMMER/DESIGNER ROBIN WALKER



what we want to do next

RW: *HL2*'s gameplay also followed a similar pattern of progression. Toward the end, you got the super gravity gun and became a god for the short time before it's taken away, and that added to the definite feeling that "I'm here; things are coming to a head." And the story had to support all sorts of players, too. Some testers wouldn't spend as much time thinking about the story as others, and so we decided to make the stuff that we did interactive. One of the areas we consider most successful in terms of storytelling is the sequence in Eli's lab where what you decide to look at determines what he talks to you about. You know—look at the articles about the seven-hour war, and he talks about the seven-hour war; look at the photo of his wife, and he talks about his relationship with her. The story's there—if you have the desire to find it and to dig into it, you can. Conversely, if you'd rather run through the whole thing and shoot Combine, we're not making you slog through text

ML: Well, even that player still stumbles across stuff that he or she may wonder about and may want to fit in with other pieces of the puzzle.

CGW: Are you applying this "the end is implicit in the beginning" principle to *Aftermath*?

ML: Yes. Reflecting the macro plan at the micro level is a great way to work. And with *Aftermath*, there's something about a shorter experience where you can have the whole episode in your mind all at once, and it seems like it's all a single continuous experience. We're definitely going for that; we want you to think about how your first day started in *Half-Life 2* when your final day ends.

RW: And [that's] even easier in the episode, given that it's not as long....

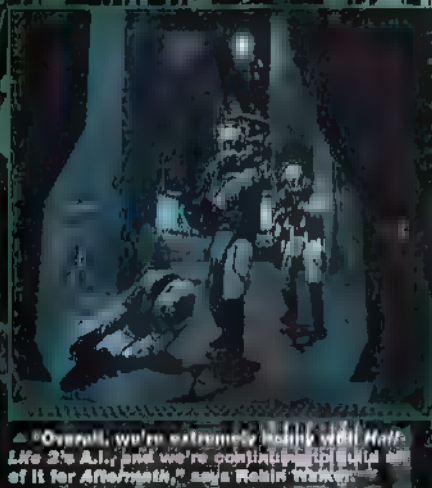
ML: Well, it's denser. Look at a game like *ico* [on PlayStation 2]—it's powerful not because it's 100 hours long, but because when the really wrenching moments happen at the end, you remember all the things that led up to them. And that's something that the Steam approach allows us to do deliber-

ately, to try new things. Again, if you're designing an epic experience, the weight you have to put on the different parts is really different than the weight of designing something more concentrated. I love big epic novels, but I also like novelettes and short stories. You know, each is a different experience, so we're enjoying ourselves now, making this the most dense and concentrated thing it can be.

CGW: How far ahead are you thinking with *Half-Life 2*'s episodes?

ML: We never know what will work before we build it, test it, and iterate on it, so we don't necessarily set hard-and-fast rules about how the story has to go in a certain spot until we've tried out some of our assumptions. We've got story and gameplay going on at the same time, and they'd better be balanced, but we do have some sense of the global things we want to do. Usually, it's the other way around, though, where gameplay ideas open up whole new avenues for the story. A character like Father Grigori, or combining bug bait >

► The buddy system: Alyx stays by your side throughout the entire experience.



► with antlions—these came out of story discussions as much as out of gameplay discussions. That's one of the cool things about storytelling through gameplay: They both feed each other.

RW: I agree. And one of the things we constantly try to accomplish here is to make sure that story is not something that happens anywhere other than where you are. You know, when we sat down to work out how to do Mossman's betrayal, we were really trying to figure out how we could handle it in a way where you're there when it happens...which, of course, comes with other challenges of its own. For instance, why wouldn't players try to stop Mossman? Can we deal with the story implications of players successfully stopping her? But that's stuff we think is worth solving. That's what makes our games worth playing. So sure, we have a road map, but I should point out that we're not only planning story, but gameplay ideas and A.I. as well.

ML: And technology. We might have an idea for a powerful scene, but we also know that it won't



"NONE OF OUR IDEAS EVER NECESSARILY GO AWAY." -MARC LAIDLAW

work unless we decide to develop the technology to pull it off in the way that we picture it.

CGW: Any plans to implement shelved ideas, situations, and settings in *Aftermath*—stuff like the Hydra that appeared in *Half-Life 2* previews?

ML: [Smiles] Mossman came from *Half-Life*—she was a character we couldn't pull off until *Half-Life 2*. So I'd say that none of our ideas, if we're attached to them, ever necessarily go away.

RW: We cut things because they aren't entertaining enough, because they don't work, or because they take too much time. So the cost of creating something like the Hydra then might have been X, but now that we've built a bunch of other stuff, it's actually cheaper. I will say that *Aftermath* certainly has a whole set of ideas in it that we cut out of *Half-Life 2*, or that we thought of while we were

creating *Half-Life 2*, or are reactions to things that we know people appreciated about *Half-Life 2*.

CGW: Even the Lost Coast level incorporates the idea of a head crab canister delivery system that you ditched in *Half-Life 2*....

RW: Right. And it ties the story of Ravenholm to the village in Lost Coast. This is the spot where the Combine softened up the town, shelling it with head crabs before sending in the troops.

ML: The original plan was to put it in the canal sequence, but that was weird, because for story purposes, it would have been weaker to see the thing before you saw Ravenholm. It was in the wrong place. So now is a better time to see something like that, after having been

RW: ...on the receiving end. The original idea was to have you shoot down the helicopter with ►

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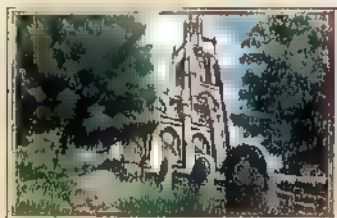
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DAY OF DEFEAT: SOURCE

World War II gets the Valve treatment

► **Q:** I've read that you're going to have a lot of cutscenes in *Half-Life 2*. How much of that is just showing the story, and how much of it is just showing the world? I mean, I know you're going to have a lot of cutscenes, but I'm not sure if you're going to have a lot of cutscenes that are just showing the world, or if you're going to have a lot of cutscenes that are just showing the story.

A: I think it's a mix of both. I think we're going to have a lot of cutscenes that are just showing the world, and I think we're going to have a lot of cutscenes that are just showing the story. I think we're going to have a lot of cutscenes that are just showing the world, and I think we're going to have a lot of cutscenes that are just showing the story.

► **Q:** WHEN *DOD*'S CREATORS CHANGE THEIR TACTICS, THOSE OF US IN THE TRENCHES WILL HAVE A SAY IN WHETHER OR NOT IT STICKS.

► the head crab canister launcher that the Combine used to shell Ravenholm.

CGW: Sort of poetic justice. As an idea, *Aftermath* might seem anticlimactic to some—mopping up unplugged stragglers after the big battle. Tell us there's more to it than that.

ML: Basically, it's always been about personal survival. With *Half-Life 2*, we tried to tie that in with allies—how much you can actually accomplish alone, and how important it is to interact with other people.

RW: Much of *Aftermath* focuses on interacting with Alyx, and so the bulk of our A.I. work has been on her. One of the main reasons that we didn't do this in *Half-Life 2* is that it's a heck of a lot of work to spend so much time with a figure that's more than a faceless character. So focusing on her has allowed us to put more into her personality, and that's posed interesting problems. I suppose you could say we've been writing A.I. code, but it's felt more like personality code.

CGW: So you're creating drama through characterization?

ML: All the time. All the time we spend with Alyx is in action, so we have to show her personality through what she's saying when she's in combat and that creates her as a character. But what should she say while you're standing around trying to solve a puzzle? Not random comments, either, but something that expresses her character and feeds into the player's experience.

RW: People have a knack for spotting any kind of random A.I. conversation.

CGW: Especially when she starts repeating herself.

RW: Exactly. Real people never repeat things, or never repeat them in the same intonation. And since Alyx is with you the whole the way, that means that she has to do something even when you're standing around sorting things out. She can't stand there with her ability to see what's going on in the world suddenly switched off. It's a

big battle we've been fighting. Still, we felt it was the right battle to fight after *Half-Life 2*—something we couldn't have done before. Another challenge is that if the player can jump up here and go over there, then the A.I. needs to be able to jump up and go over there. If the player crawls under this, then the A.I. needs to, too.

ML: In *Half-Life*, characters could repeat themselves endlessly, and it was this sort of comical thing—you know, you'd leave Barney in one room, and there he'd be in the next. We're in a different world now.

RW: The wicked thing about the world we're in is that it's always about perception. We'll have testers go through the same scenario, and one will say, "It's silly that she said this or that." Everyone has his own idea of who [Alyx] is, and now they're evaluating her against their own experiences.

CGW: Does constant companionship make *Aftermath* a different experience than *HL2*, where contact was often sporadic?





...and thinking why, but we'll come back to that; we can think of a better way to communicate. Among the few features to make here are the abilities to prime grenades—perfect for keeping the other guy from playing hot potato—and to deploy machine guns on any solid surface instead of the predetermined spots in *DODs* past.

City of Defense is a work in progress that will develop on a near biweekly basis once it's released in store—and via Valve's Steam digital distribution service for somewhere between \$10 and \$20 this fall. "We're bringing players into the process, and therefore they have a closer association with and a greater affinity for the product," says Lombardi. "And when... They feel they're a part of it. So we want to continue that, and with *Source* and *Steam* in place, we can now put new pieces in front of people instantly. We're running a friends-and-family beta test, for instance, and can produce a change within an hour. Then, at 2:00 that afternoon we realize we made a bad move; we can roll it back without the user having to do a thing. On the other hand, we have feedback functionally: If you find a crash or an exploit, you simply click a tab and say, 'Here's where I am. Here's what the problem is. Here's my e-mail.' And you can take a screenshot and send that, too."

Finally, the team—once a group of bedroom-based guys themselves—expects tech-savvy fans to further the DIY tradition by fiddling with the game's groundwork. "Much of *DOD's* gameplay came out of what these guys did with custom maps," says Boone. "A few of 'em even joined us—guys on the forums with the same 'let's try this, let's try that' attitude with which we built *DOD*. So, yeah, I'd be depressed if that didn't always continue, actually."

>> **DOD'S TOOTH-RATTLING RECOIL AND LIGHTNING-WAR FACE ARE ALL INTACT.**



RW: The tension's still there. In some ways, having another character there that's able to emote and respond to the world actually adds to our ability to make this thing scary. If cool, confident Alyx suddenly can't handle something, it'll have an impact on you.

CGW: What about atmospheric variety, one of the things that worked so well in *Half-Life 2*? Isn't all of *Aftermath* set in City 17?

ML: There's huge variety here

RW: The events in *Half-Life 2* have changed things. The city is not the same. One of the fun things for us is to take a space that our audience knows fairly well and fundamentally change it, so that the effects slowly sink in.

CGW: You revealed an awful lot about *Half-Life 2* before its release. This time, you seem cagier. Are you afraid you'll reveal the twists?

RW: Not really. *Half-Life 2* had to sell itself more. At this point, people know enough

ML: Say "City 17," and people already have an

impression of it. In other words, we don't feel that we have to slick this shocker in to make the whole experience worthwhile. Plus, personally and as a player, I like surprises, so I try to aim it toward people like myself—they can start to get excited because they know they're back in City 17 and the citadel's doing a bad thing. They're with characters they care about, and the rest is promises and that sense of excitement.

CGW: Does seeing things through another character's eyes—say, those of Alyx or Dog—count as a shocker? You've done it before with the *Half-Life* expansions *Opposing Force* and *Blue Shift*.

ML: Some of those stories strayed off the main path. The most extreme example is *Uplink*, where you're going, "I'm Gordon Freeman, right? I don't

remember doing this in *Half-Life*." That's not the case with *Aftermath*; everything in *Aftermath* is core canon stuff. Every event in it is significant and incorporated into the story of the *Half-Life* universe. If you miss this episode, you're missing the main story.

RW: We're not saying no, we're never going to do that, but I think that if we do go in that direction, we'll try to find an interesting way to do it. We've talked about [head crab] *Lamar's Big Adventure*.

CGW: Aside from working with Alyx, is *Aftermath* generating other gameplay ideas?

ML: More gravity gun stuff that we never got around to.

RW: Alyx acquires new abilities, allowing you to interact with her in some interesting ways. In *Half-Life 2*, you could tell allies to attack this or that, >

>> **"HALF-LIFE 2 CHANGED THINGS. CITY 17 IS NOT THE SAME." -ROBIN WALKER**



Fair-weather friends: Apparently, antlions are back to being nuisances.



► and we want to take that even further but make it less of a user-interface issue and more intuitively interactive. Like, letting the A.I. take cues from what you're doing from your actions alone. So there are lots of little ways in which the A.I. is working with you.

CGW: Can you give an example?

RW: Not without giving the whole thing away. Gordon has a set of skills and tools from *Half-Life 2* that he brings forward, and Alyx's abilities mesh with them. Again, some of the things in *Half-Life 2*, like antlions becoming your allies, worked really well, and...I'll leave it at that.

CGW: Gabe, you once said that "*Half-Life*

gave us this great legacy to live up to." Are expectations for *Aftermath* even higher now, after *Half-Life 2*, or is there a certain sense that expanded content is never of the same caliber?

Gabe Newell: No, we're always moving ahead, and for each one of the episodes, we're identifying an area to focus on. So for *Aftermath*, or *Episode 1*, it's all about character interaction—how they interact with you and with the world—and taking what we did in *Half-Life 2* and doing it better. And so in *Episode 2*, there are areas and vehicles that we saw potential in and wanted to push forward. Releasing these on a much more regular basis (through Steam) lets everybody think about one thing at a time. But our expectation is that the episodes will be better than *Half-Life 2* was.

CGW: What are some of the lessons you learned with *Half-Life 2* that might inform *Aftermath*?

GN: Well, people enjoyed the closely coupled interactions. A lot of people's favorite moment was

playing ball with Dog, and the idea that you have this other creature in the world who's interacting with you in this fine-grained way, where you're doing something and they're reacting to it right there. So that's something we said we needed to do more of. We need to make players feel like they can rely on and are dependent upon other people in the game. So there's a lot of stuff where you can't do anything, you're relying on Alyx to do it for you.

CGW: That's interesting, almost the opposite of the paradigm that has us holding the hands of helpless girls in so many games.

GN: And we also want to tightly couple that person to the world. We don't want to have this sense that there's a box around her. We want her to react to her surroundings, to reach for stuff, to push things....

CGW: So the company seems committed to episodic content...what about new IPs?

GN: As we're going along, we may come across certain challenges that don't fit into the *Half-Life* ►



**"AFTERMATH IS
CORE CANON
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▲ All these *Drome*s in the trunk, yet she still forgets to peak some jumper cables and a spare tire.



Mutants are looking awfully *Peace* out.

► universe. We could then work those into a stand-alone episode and test that—see whether people say, "Hey, that's great!" or "Gee, that's stupid!"—without having to waste a year and a half investing in a project only to find out that it isn't going to work. It would be nice to be able to get a chunk of the concept out there and have people respond to it. And sometimes, in order to do that, we'll be creating new worlds, new characters, new gameplay, and new technology.

CGW: Of the tech that ended up not working for *Half-Life 2*, is there one thing in particular that you're especially committed to putting in a later episode?

GN: There's some technology that I'd like to put into production called image-based rendering. Everything proximate is physical, and everything far

away is an image, but it all feels like one world if it's done properly. And, as far as rendering is concerned, we're keeping our polygon budgets and our shader budgets and our fill rates under control, so that we can move around in an arbitrarily complicated environment without sacrificing stable performance. I would love to put people into cities where they can navigate the entire thing and say to themselves, "My God, so much good stuff is going on!" And anything I can see, I can also walk over to and interact with. If it's far away, I can fake it with image interpolation; as it gets closer, I give you low-res versions of it; and when it's up close, it has all the complexity needed to spin around and bounce off of other things.

CGW: Is this the sort of thing you can add to Source and introduce via levels like *Lost Coast*?

GN: Yep. What do you think of *Lost Coast*?

CGW: It looks great. Technologically, you can tell the difference in an instant. And the commentary clips are another cool idea.

GN: Hopefully, that'll be a standard feature for all of our stuff now. See, that's the thing, we like being able to get stuff out to people, like high dynamic range lighting [see *Lost Coast* sidebar]—we can solve all the technical problems, get it out, and make sure it works with everybody's display adapters without waiting until *Half-Life 3*. So the theory is that, by having these smaller releases, customers feel like everything's advancing faster. And certainly from a developer's point of view, being able to focus on one thing at a time, rather than trying to get 20 different pieces of technology shipped simultaneously, takes a lot less work.

One thing that's interesting, though, is that it's like the entire industry has been making feature films. It's been about big, costly, complicated projects, and the door is only now starting to open for TV



"[STEAM] CERTAINLY TURNED OUT TO BE A GREAT WAY TO SELL GAMES." —GABE NEWELL

IN NOVEMBER 1998, RITUAL Entertainment's highly anticipated *SIN* hit shelves. And while the *Quake II*-based sci-fi shooter was solid, it slipped within weeks of the original *Half-Life*. *SIN* still garnered a cult following that led to one expansion and an anime movie before its makers moved on to other projects. Deep down, though, executive vice president and chief designer Tom Mustaine recalls, "We always wanted to come back to our baby."

THE NEXT EPISODES

Ritual is the first developer to fully buy into Steam's digital distribution technology, putting Valve in a new role: publisher. "We're only six months into the project, but this has been six years in the making," says Mustaine.

The first Steam-exclusive *SIN* episode (available this winter) will set you back 15 bucks, which buys you some six hours of entertainment. Like Valve's own incremental *Half-Life* content, the point is to provide smaller, more manageable games of greater quality. "This isn't something to milk money out of consumers," Mustaine assures us. "Rather than making a \$60 game over two to three years, we want to make episodes [every three to six months] that are as good as any triple-A title."

And that's saying nothing of the impact the modding community might make. With constant infusions of new content from the developer—texture sets, character models, and audio samples—we're talking Christmas every couple months. In fact, Mustaine says Ritual is considering creating a Source version of the original *SIN* game, giving the makers even more material with which to make games.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

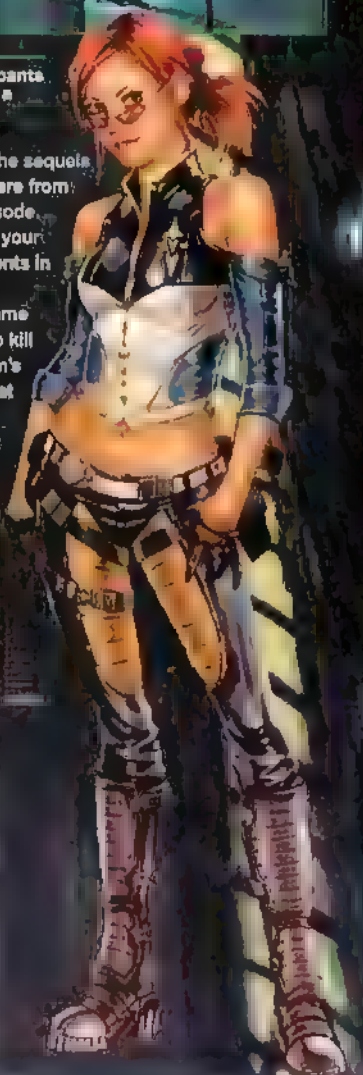
So far, Ritual has six episodes scheduled. And while the developer is linking several story arcs together, much like a serialized TV show or movie trilogy, each episode should also stand alone as its own story, so nobody feels like they do if they stumble into TV show *Lost* late in the season.

Still, there's added incentive to play straight through: so-called action-linked outcomes. The original *SIN* offered interactivity in spades, and you

actions sometimes carried unexpected consequences. Mustaine explains: "You'd do something on one level, which may not have seemed to be such a big deal, but it would drastically affect something in a later level. Like, you'd break a pipe in one place, and the next area would be flooded, and then you'd have to swim through it." The sequels take it a few steps further, with anywhere from five to 10 significant decisions per episode. Do you kill so-and-so? Do you protect your pals? Your choices could influence events in upcoming episodes for everyone. For instance, if most people playing the game hate a certain character and choose to kill him outright, those that opt in to Steam's stat-tracking system will send back that information to Ritual. It's the gamer's way of voting someone out of the next installment. "We can take that risk, and if it works, great. If not, we see what else we can do to make it work in the next episode," Mustaine says. "We want to make sure people keep coming back to play more."



Yes, these pants do give me a wedgie.



INTERACTIVITY IN ACTION

Tom Mustaine on *SIN* Episodes: "In the beginning, Black is busted up. We have no idea why. He's on the highway in a car, coming in and out of consciousness, and this sidekick, Jessica Cannon, is with him trying to wake him up. Then [the game] flashes back to how you got in this mess in the first place. You can see everything in the car, or you can see the radio station, open the door, and you can shoot the glass out of the car, and you can



shows. And TV is totally different from film. So we're really curious to see how people respond. What are we going to do right and what are we going to do wrong? Hopefully, we'll see other companies try these things, too, and learn from their lessons as well...whether we need to release once a week or once a quarter.

CGW: What are your plans so far?

GN: Right now, it's about once every three months.

CGW: And then release seasonal box sets at retail?

GN: Right

CGW: Changing gears, were we overly harsh on Steam's activation process when *Half-Life 2* shipped [CGW #248]?

GN: It was bad.

CGW: How has Steam come along since the service started?

GN: [Pauses] Well, we've stopped making people insane at least. We had two painful periods: one

when it went from being optional to being obligatory for updates, and then the *Half-Life 2* launch, when we couldn't handle the capacity. Both are painful memories for us, so at least now we're not setting people on fire. We're updating regularly, and the process is really smooth right now. Actually, we're sort of rearchitecting Steam, so people are running two versions of it right now—they may not realize it, but they're running Steam 2 and Steam 3 alongside each other. The nice thing about having a system like this is that there's no reason not to have your old system and your new system coexist while you're migrating functionality from one to the other. So from a technical perspective it's evolving, and from the not-annoying-the-hell-out-of-our-customers perspective, I think we're out of that hole. It certainly turned out to be a great way to sell games. We were worried that people wouldn't want to purchase products that way—now that's not a concern. However, we have to find ways to make Steam more valuable to people, to solve problems

for people. We still aren't getting display drivers out to people automatically, for example, which makes me crazy.

CGW: Is Microsoft likely to address that with its Vista operating system?

GN: That will be great...when Vista actually ships. I'd rather not have to rely on it either shipping or being successful among gamers, though. So that's something that would clearly be valuable to customers, and it's the sort of thing I want to see us continue to move toward.

CGW: Developer Ritual is selling *SIN* Episodes over Steam. Is distributing third-party products a direction you'll continue in?

GN: Well, there's a deeper issue in this, and that's "what do we need from platforms?" Look, I spoke to some people at Microsoft, and as I said, I can't point to a single feature in Vista that I care about that solves problems for us. At all. And I had the same conversation with the Xbox 360 guys. It's like, Xbox 360 doesn't make my life any better, >

► and in fact, it makes it a lot worse, as you're telling me I can't count on having a hard drive. And when I look at what I need to compete with... well, the most promising property right now is *World of Warcraft*, with its huge retail sales and huge recurring revenue. And not only that, but they have a great experience wrapped around it—whether it's their forums or community art or whatever, they're not only getting their customers to play the game, they're getting their customers to make the experience more valuable for other people who play the game.

So when I look at what a platform needs to help developers do right now, it's figure out how to fight *World of Warcraft*. And none of the strategies that Microsoft or Sony or Nintendo are proposing are making my life easier. There are incredibly few programmers who can safely write code in the PlayStation 3 environment. And I totally see why Sony wants people to write code that runs on seven SPEs and a central processing unit,

because that code is never going to run well anywhere else. They're saying, "Make your code not run on anything but one of our machines, and we're betting that we'll have market share that's so high that everybody will have to write code for our platform, and we'll just starve the air from the other platforms by absorbing everybody's R&D budget and making their code less portable." I understand why that makes sense from Sony's perspective, but that doesn't solve any problems for software developers such as ourselves.

So with Steam we're saying, "Here's a set of tools that software developers need, focused on solving the problems that we have with this next generation of games." And that includes billing, updates, product support, connecting our customers to one another, and things like that. So it'll be interesting to see how important that functionality is to other developers. In the case of the guys at Ritual, they seem to think it's useful, and solves problems for them. /

RETAIL VS. ONLINE

► He shies away from disclosing sales figures, but Valve's Gabe Newell is pretty happy with Steam so far. Still, Valve needs to get onto store shelves.

Enter Electronic Arts. Though Tom Frisina, vice president and general manager of EA Partners, couldn't comment on future releases beyond *Half-Life 2: Game of the Year* and *Counter-Strike: Source* for PC (both launching this fall), he assures us that the companies want to work together.

Does this mean EA will adopt Steam? No, but according to Frisina, "I think you'll see a similar approach to Steam from EA soon. It's natural for developers to maintain a close relationship with the community. I believe online will account for 15 percent of sales."

SOURCE MODS

Valve's five favorites



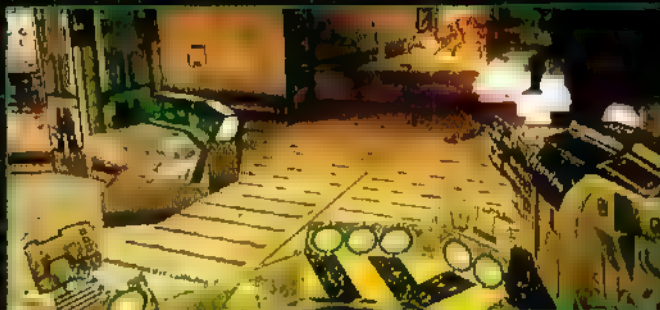
► **ALIEN SWARM: INFESTATION** URL: www.blackoutgames.com/swarm/
Let's just say that this sweet-looking tactical actioner was "inspired" by James Cameron's *Aliens*. The team is rebuilding *Swarm*, originally a product of UT2004's Make Something Unusual contest, for the Source engine.



► **GARRY'S MOD** URL: www.garry.tv/garrysmod/
Think of this one as a director's tool for *Machinima* and virtual Tinkertoy set—all rolled into a QMS mod. Friends, you haven't lived until you've re-created "Thriller" with Barney and head crash zombies.



► **ECLIPSE URL:** students.guildhall.smu.edu/~eclipse/
Give the students at Guildhall game design college some credit for creating a fantasy-themed, puzzle-based action game out of *Half-Life 2*. This total conversion is worth the space on your hard drive—so grab it.



► **NATURAL SELECTION** URL: www.unlsworlds.com/ns/
Blending first-person combat with real-time strategy, *Half-Life* mod *Natural Selection* beat *Battlefield 2*'s commander mode to the punch. Plus, you can play as mutating, wall-walking, Marine-devouring aliens.



► **PLAN OF ATTACK** URL: www.planofattackgame.com/
Unpolished but full of promise, the team- and class-based *Plan of Attack* mod is already a favorite around Valve's offices and could be a decent distraction until Valve is ready to release *Team Fortress 2*.



BLOW \$#% UP... AGAIN.

Coming October 2005

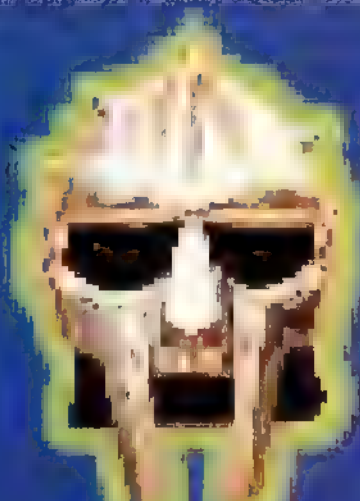
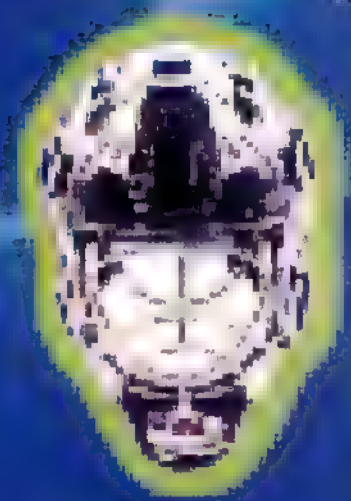
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REVIEWS

**WE PLAY CRAP
SO YOU DON'T
HAVE TO**



81

THE DRY SEASON

BETWEEN LISTENING TO THE SWEETLY
from Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green's office and


UNITED STATES

November Issue 2005

REVIEW STANDARDS

Our review policy is simple: We review only final, gold, released-to-retail code, no betas or "near-final, reviewable" builds. We don't review patches, with the notable exception of those for online games like MMOs that autoupdate as a standard part of their operation. We do this so we are reviewing exactly what you, the consumer, are buying.



 All games are rated on a simple five-star scale. One-star games are utter garbage, three-star games should appeal to die-hard fans of the genre, and the rare five-star game is an instant classic. Only the best games—receiving four and a half stars or better—are awarded an Editors' Choice.

INSIDE



RYL

Because the world needs another bad MMO.



BloodRayne 2

Your blood isn't the only thing that's draining.



ER

Get this game to the landfill—stat!



As you level up, you'll be able to summon more members to join your party. You even get a free dog—and he never dies.

THE BARD'S TALE

So this lute player walks into a bar

AS THE GREAT PHILOSOPHER/POET DAVID ST. Hubbins once said, "There is such a fine line between stupid and clever." And so it is with *The Bard's Tale*, a game that could have been very stupid indeed, but thanks to a smart and talented team, it manages instead to be extremely entertaining (mostly). Developer InXile

be annoyed or disappointed, but for the PC version (the console version has been out since January), the developers were at least generous enough to throw the three original games in the box (see sidebar).

This is essentially a console RPG, using the same engine that powered Snowblind Studios'

COIN AND CLEAVAGE

Unlike the old games, this *Bard's Tale* is, in fact, about a bard. You play as a cynical, selfish, greedy adventurer who travels the land with lute in hand searching for "coin and cleavage." Your journey could not be more clichéd or generic, with every single RPG convention—beginning with a quest to kill a rat—hailed out one by one. Fortunately, the developers did this on purpose, with the bard himself (wonderfully voiced by Cary Elwes of *Princess Bride* fame) constantly complaining about the rote nature of it all. In lesser hands, such an idea might have been just too facile—this isn't exactly the hardest genre to parody. But *The Bard's Tale* succeeds because the developers clearly love RPGs and understand how they work, and they prove it with a number of nice gameplay touches.

Chief among them is the summoning system, which allows your lute to instantly teleport party members to your side as you play. As you progress through the game, you'll learn tunes to summon new members (up to 16 total by game's end), and your party's size will steadily grow. The party members cover all the expected bases—healer, warrior, archer, spellcaster—

CHARACTERS MOCK YOUR PROGRESS AND SING ABOUT WHAT A LOSER YOU ARE

Entertainment delivers what few could have pulled off: a joke-filled parody of the RPG genre that manages to be a decent action-RPG itself. Given that most games can't figure out how to be either funny or fun to play, it's laudatory that *The Bard's Tale* deftly accomplishes both.

Though it bears the same name as the classic RPG series begun in 1985—and is even produced by the same guy, industry veteran Brian Fargo—the new *Bard's Tale* bears no resemblance to the originals in any way. Nostalgic old-timers expecting a modern-day remake might

PlayStation 2 games *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Champions of Norrath*. The console trappings are a little off-putting at first: The game's perspective is strictly top-down; you can't move the camera at all except for a minor, useless zoom. The default mouse and keyboard controls are wonky and awkward. And there's no quicksave—just checkpoints scattered along the way. All of this might conspire to antagonize you, but if you can learn to deal with it (it took me about two hours), you'll find yourself treated to a pretty fun hack-n-slash adventure.



Hordes of evil druids are waiting to kill you and your party at every turn.

but also have some nice twists. The light fairy, for example, helps to illuminate dark areas, but if you keep him in your party during combat, you'll discover that he can blind enemies. Since your party size is limited, you must constantly figure out effective combinations, and the varied creatures and environments ensure that you'll never keep the same party together for long.

Also, the streamlined inventory management system should appeal to newbies, and RPG veterans will definitely appreciate a game that instantly converts loot drops into hard currency. This makes inventory nonexistent and eliminates the anticipation and satisfaction of netting "phat lewt"—a genre staple—but it also spares you the tedious chore of making constant trips to the shopkeeper. New weapons and armor act as quest rewards, and you always auto-equip the best stuff you have. Again, hardcore players might scoff at the simplicity, but it's an honest relief (even for a hardcore RPG dork like me) to be spared a lot of aggravating micromanagement.

DIE, RELOAD, REPEAT

On the downside, the hordes of respawning monsters, combined with the lack of a quick-save, led me to a few instances of frustrated keyboard pounding. There's a nice variety of environments—dungeons, snowy mountainsides, forests—but you'll do far too much backtracking in some spots. Worse, though your quest is mostly linear, there are times when new levels unlock, but the game doesn't properly warn you against tackling them out of order. Entering certain areas will trigger the start of a new story chapter, even if you don't happen to be at that part of the story yet. While in the middle of Chapter 3, for example, I inadvertently walked into a new area and got presented with the Chapter 9 title screen. Whoops.

Still, *The Bard's Tale* won me over in a fairly big way. Above all, the writing and voice acting are far superior to most other videogames'. It's rare for a game to be actually funny, but this one has numerous laugh-out-loud moments, including a quest to find a guy in a village where everyone shares the same

name. There are also a few arbitrary musical numbers (reminiscent of the Oompa Loompa songs in *Willy Wonka*) that stop the game cold while a group of characters mock your progress and sing about what a loser you are...now that's good stuff!

There are certainly more hardcore RPGs out there, but *The Bard's Tale* is the kind of lighthearted fare that helps remind us that—once in a while—maybe we shouldn't take this all so seriously.

—Jeff Green



The woman floating in the blue stuff is the princess you're trying to save...and sleep with.



You'll encounter a number of deliberately generic, unfriendly, deceitful NPCs.



THE ORIGINAL BARD'S TALE GAMES

Don't miss out on the classic Bard's Tale games. They're available on CD-ROM and PC. The first game is the best, but the second is also a great choice. The third is a bit of a disappointment, but it's still a good game. The fourth is a bit of a disappointment, but it's still a good game. The fifth is a bit of a disappointment, but it's still a good game.

The most fun you'll ever have with a lute.

COMPUTER
GAMING
REVIEW

VERDICT
★★★★☆

DENISE "THE MACHINE" COOK

During her years writing for C&W, reviewer Denise Cook has suffered through some awful games, including one zero-star stinker. Sorry about that, Denise!



Mouse-and-keyboard mode gives a closer view of the action...but attacking requires so many steps that it's hardly worth bothering to tweak your setup.

RYL: PATH OF THE EMPEROR

Don't take the risk



PVE comprises about 80 of the 95 levels your character is capable of ascending to.



There are some picturesque areas in RYL, but overall, the graphical engine just sucks.



For some inexplicable reason, you can't change any of the keyboard command presets.

THE "RYL" IN PLANETWIDE GAMES' FANTASY MMORPG *RYL: Path of the Emperor* stands for "risk your life," but once you've been introduced to the game's myriad bugs, frustrating gameplay, and ridiculous control scheme, you'll find that the only thing you're risking here is your precious free time.

Cumbersome doesn't begin to sum up *RYL*'s interface. You can't change any default keyboard controls, and there's no autotargeting command during combat. Instead, you're required to select individual enemies with your mouse cursor, which is every bit as maddening as it sounds. Group battles are even more confusing, as other players often obstruct your line of sight. Switching to the game's wide-panning mouse-only mode doesn't make things any easier, as this leaves characters

barely distinguishable from one another as they struggle to lock on to a target.

Magic-user characters have an especially difficult existence. While melee classes such as warriors, assassins, and gunners (who are particularly overpowered) conveniently lock on to any mob they target, sorcerers must repeat the targeting process for each and every spell, effectively making them the most frustrating class to play as. Once you figure in the ridiculous chance for spell interruptions and the numerous deaths you'll suffer because of it, you'll find that your experience bar almost seems to move backward more quickly than it moves forward.

BACK TO THE GRIND

RYL offers little substance to keep you engrossed in the action once you've grown sick of the frustrating interface, scattershot combat, and frequent character deaths. The graphical engine is extremely dated, and the in-game quests are extremely sparse, making your grind across the even-sparsier landscape feel like more of a chore than it should be. There just isn't much variety to the game world—and by extension, there's very little to keep you

enthralled past the initial free trial period.

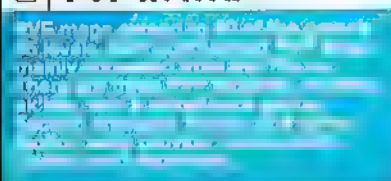
In fact, *RYL*'s one possible redeeming quality is its monthly fee: After your first month expires, a two-month block costs \$12.95, while a seven-month package is \$38.85, and a year-long commitment (which comes with a "free" MP3 player) will run you \$180. While this might sound like a bargain when compared to many competing MMOs (which average \$14.95 per month), trust us when we say you're getting what you pay for. Perhaps it's worth the savings for some, but it depends on how much you buy in to *RYL*'s other gimmick: a 10-month-long PVP competition on a tournament server, in which 12 top-ranking semi-finalists per month will eventually duke it out for a cash prize of \$1,000,000.

It also depends on whether or not you like Planetwide's tactic of marketing the game by using "bonus" subscription incentives and competitions for flashy cash prizes in lieu of good, quality gameplay. Jackpot dreams aside, if *RYL*'s shortcomings and occasional crashes, bugs, and lag don't deter you from playing it, then superior MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars* ultimately wilt.

Denise Cook



PVP IN RYL



THERE'S VERY LITTLE TO KEEP YOU ENTHRALLED PAST THE INITIAL FREE TRIAL PERIOD.

Next time, use the million-dollar PVP cash prize to improve gameplay.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★

RESTRICTED AREA

Trespassers will be clicked to death and booted to desktop

PUBLISHER: VISION GAMES **DEVELOPER:** VISION GAMES **GENRE:** Action-RPG **ESRB RATING:** M
REQUIRED: Pentium III 600MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.1GB hard drive space **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium
 4 1.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2 players)

ACCORDING TO THE MANUAL, *RESTRICTED AREA* was created by exactly two people—and it shows. Now we aren't just talking about the sorely outdated shareware-caliber graphics, the amateurish techno soundtrack, the poorly translated dialogue, the horrible monster AI, or even the truckload of glitches and crashes you'll encounter. No, what we mean is: Unabashedly dull action-RPG gameplay that will leave your eyes glazed over and your keyboard covered in a puddle of your own drool.

Basically, this is *Diablo* meets *Shadowrun*: a run-and-gun clickfeet through a dreary near-future wasteland where cyborgs, mutants, and other sci-fi malcontents have taken up residence. You can choose from among four genre-

stereotypes (*Matrix*-copycat gun bunny, sword-wielding yakuza reject, psychic bimbo, and punked-out hacker chick), each with an area of expertise and a skill tree that you customize as you level up.

About 10 minutes in, *Restricted Area* devolves into little more than monotonous mouse clicking as you navigate uninspired dungeons, fight generic baddies, and collect lame loot. You'll also deal with desktop crashes, pathfinding problems, and frustrating areas where enemies will overwhelm you. If you want to share your misery with a friend, there's a featureless two-player online option that lets you do just that. Or you could just hit Alt-Fab, watch the game crash, and then uninstall it. / Ryan Scott



RESTRICTED AREA: VISION GAMES

It looks and plays like it was made by two guys in a basement—which, in fact, it was.

COMPUTER
GAMING
 WORLD

VERDICT
 ★★☆☆☆

THE GUILDHALL AT SMU

Quality Education. Quality Graduates.
 Quality Companies.



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 AGEIA TECHNOLOGIES
 ARCHIMAGE
 BUDGAT CREATION
 FACTOR 5
 GEARBOX SOFTWARE
 ID SOFTWARE
 NCSoft
 NERVE SOFTWARE
 NEVERSOFT ENTERTAINMENT
 PANDEMIC STUDIOS
 RITUAL ENTERTAINMENT
 STREAMLINE STUDIOS
 TERMINAL REALITY



Brian Harris
 Cohort 1 Graduate

id software

ER

We've got a flatliner here



The doctors at County General abandon their white lab coats when they're sleeping, slumping over light-lit

PUBLISHER: Legacy Interactive DEVELOPER: Legacy Interactive GENRE: Management Sim
ESRB RATING: T RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: None

BASED ON THE TV SHOW THAT FEATURED actor George Clooney back before he donned bet garb and battled a pre gubernatorial Arnold Schwarzenegger, *ER* is supposed to be a doctor sim. It pretty much fails at that, as you will find nothing but carpal-tunnel-inducing mouse clicking, pointless chitchat, and a stat system that plays out like a shallow *Sims* rip-off.

The bulk of *ER*'s gameplay consists of wandering about Chicago's County General under the eye of a busted camera while waiting for other doctors (competently voiced by actors from the show) to give you assignments. But in this hospital, doing your duty gets old fast. There's a lobby, where you'll mindlessly click on patients to diagnose them; exam rooms, where you'll mindlessly click on patients to treat whatever malady they're grappling with (which nets you experience points, used to improve any of six medical disciplines); and a few lounge areas, where you'll mindlessly click on showers and oots to replenish your ever-dwindling health stats. Other tasks

(such as tracking down certain people) appear at times, but it all boils down to walking back and forth across the hospital and robotically clicking on whatever you've been told to deal with.

When you aren't pretending to save lives, you can converse with other hospital faculty, which entails selecting from generic topics in the hopes of eliciting a positive reaction. With no real incentive for your interactions and no depth to speak of, this too is ultimately pointless...which is strange, considering the game's source material. *ER* is ostensibly targeted at fans of the show, but it fails to deliver any of the excitement that an audience might expect from a game based on television's most highly acclaimed medical drama. / Ryan Scott

Get this game a doctor.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLDVERDICT
★★★★★

BLOODRAYNE 2

Grab your stake and holy water

CPU, 256MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 200MB swap space RECOMMENDED: 2.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, gamepad MULTIPLAYER: None

"SUBTLE" ISN'T A WORD THAT COMES TO mind when you're controlling a half-vampire who drips like ketchup and eviscerates her enemies. *BloodRayne 2* is the favorite bloodsucking redhead's return to an action-packed follow-up to 2003's *BloodRayne*. While the plot is more or less a rip-off of the *Blade* films (an overvampire is looking to pierce the sun), a number of improvements can be found here.

Considering it's a year-late launch, it's a good-looking game—much the animation is a little twitchy, which makes some of the jumping puzzles tough to do with help that it's almost impossible to play without a gamepad. The combat fares better than the original (which was a button-mashing mess), by featuring a variety of weapons and combos. There are also puzzles, often with macabre twists: How do you break a garbage truck blocking your path? Keep throwing bodies into it and it'll size up, of course!



You'll sleep through most of the challenges, though, as your vampiric superpowers are so unbalanced that you'll cut a bloody path through the action in no time...even if you suck at these kinds of games. / Darren Gladstone

Not a bloody mess.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLDVERDICT
★★★★★

T-72 BALKANS ON FIRE!

PUBLISHER: Battlefront.com DEVELOPER: IDDK GENRE: Tank Simulator ESRB RATING: NR REQUIRED: Pentium III 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB install RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM MULTIPLAYER: LAN (2 players)



TANKS SIMS ARE few and far

between, but luckily, they're generally worth playing. *T-72* doesn't break that trend, and although it lacks the role del

A diamond in the rough.

VERDICT

★★★★★

CROWN OF GLORY
EUROPE IN THE AGE
OF NAPOLEON

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games DEVELOPER: Western Civilization Software GENRE: War Game ESRB RATING: NR REQUIRED: 200MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 650MB install RECOMMENDED: 500MHz CPU, 512MB RAM MULTIPLAYER: Internet, P2P (2-8 players)



CROWN OF GLORY is a turn-based war game that focuses on the entire Napoleonic period, from the wars of the revolution to Napoleon's

bid for European hegemony. The game tries to cover every aspect of the campaigns—economic development, technological research, diplomatic overtures, military operations, even tactical battles—but none of it is particularly gripping. Some tasks, like micromanaging resource production and tactical battles, are tedious and extraneous. The game's flexibility and scope also allow for some very unhistorical events; for instance, Turkish armies marching

every aspect, the game excels at nothing. / Qi Luo

Tries too hard to be comprehensive.

VERDICT

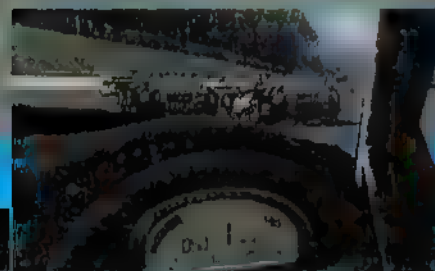
★★★★★

GTR FIA RACING

Casual gamers need not apply.

**RACING
NUT ALERT!**
CHECK OUT THE
TRACK ON PAGE 81.

> YOU CAN DRIVE EVERY CAR ON EVERY TRACK RIGHT FROM THE GET-GO. IT'S PURELY ABOUT THE THRILL OF THE RACING ITSELF.



GTR's in-the-seat view is one of the most convincing of any racing game.

GTR FIA RACING IS NOT THE KIND OF racing game for anyone other than the hardest of hardcore gearheads. Certainly, it has the requisite dumbed-down "Sunday driver" mode, which coddles you with driver aids, but to play it as such is to completely miss the point. Real men drive in full-on, hairy simulation mode without any intrusive nannying. Then they take things one step further by dropping obscene amounts of money on wheel-and-pedal sets in order to ensure that their spouses never speak to them again. Yes, GTR is a game for those of us who are comfortable with our nerditude.

FAST AND FURIOUS

To enjoy GTR to the fullest extent requires two things: a pretty high-end system setup (the recommended specs are barely enough—the game refused to install on our thoroughly pimped-out Voodoo desktop for reasons we are still unable to fathom) and a level of commitment that necessitates severing all ties with polite society. It's a game so overwhelmingly complex and painstakingly intricate that it features licensed MoTeC telemetry interpreter software (the kind used by real race teams), which is relentlessly fed by the data spat out in huge gobs by the game's physics engine. And if you don't know what that last sentence means, you are not the intended audience for

this game by any stretch of the imagination.

In laymen's terms, the physics engine provides a visceral, believable driving experience. Ignore the pretty graphics; what's important is that the feel of the road and the power of your car are convincingly conveyed. Hurtle into a corner, hit the perfect line, tap the brakes, turn in, and as you accelerate out the other side, there's a satisfying communication of the traction level you've achieved. You can almost feel the rubber connecting with the asphalt...and with practice you'll be able to discern even the slightest change in your car's behavior. Each vehicle handles differently, too, so hitting a corner in a Saleen S7 is substantially different than hitting the same corner in a BMW M coupe.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Unlike most "sim" racers, GTR doesn't arbitrarily task you with accumulating more money or vehicles. You can drive every car on every track right from the get-go; it's purely about the thrill of the racing itself, and the A.I. opponents are quite shockingly believable, with the only downfall being their complete ineptitude when it comes to successfully navigating particularly messy crashes.

If you're one of those people who remembers Sierra's *Grand Prix Legends*, let's just say that GTR matches its purity of vision in every way. In short, this is the perfect game for car dorks, and it's completely inappropriate for anyone else—but that's kind of the point.

—John Davison

drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPAYER: Internet, LAN (2-32 players)



That's me, all the way in the back on the right.



ONLINE QUIRKS

Multplayer mode is clearly not the main focus of SimBin's development efforts, as GTR's 64-player online experience is erratic at best. You'll rarely (if ever) play in a race with the maximum number of players, and things stutter along regardless of ping times. SimBin has released a patch to help address these issues, but multiplayer is still in need of some work.

A new benchmark for hardcore racing sims...mostly.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★☆

REWIND

What should you play today? Names in blue indicate Editors' Choice games.

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Act of War: Direct Action	06/05	★★★★
Aerial Strike	06/05	★★★★
Alexander	03/05	★★★★
Area 51	08/05	★★★★
Armies of Exigo	03/05	★★★★
Baseball Mogul 2006	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Battlefield 2	09/05	★★★★
Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30	06/05	★★★★
Close Combat: First to Fight	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut	03/05	★★★★
Combat: Task Force 121	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Dangerous Waters	06/05	★★★★
Domination	06/05	★★★★
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Dragon	04/05	★★★★
DRIV3R	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Dungeon Lords	09/05	★★★★
Elite Warriors: Vietnam	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Empire Earth II	05/05	★★★★
Fantastic 4	09/05	★★★★
Fate	09/05	★★★★
FlatOut	08/05	★★★★
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone	04/05	★★★★
Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich	05/05	★★★★
Gary Grigsby's World at War	08/05	★★★★
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	09/05	★★★★
Guild Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Half-Life 2	02/05	★★★★
Hearts of Iron II	04/05	★★★★
Heritage of Kings: The Settlers	05/05	★★★★

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Imperial Glory	09/05	★★★★
Joint Ops: Escalation	02/05	★★★★
Knights of Honor	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Legacy: Dark Shadows	04/05	★★★★
Lego Star Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth	02/05	★★★★
Lost Admiral Returns	05/05	★★★★
Manchester United Soccer 2006	02/05	★★★★
The Matrix Online	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	01/05	★★★★
Medieval Lords	04/05	★★★★
MVP Baseball 2006	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
NASCAR SimRacing	05/05	★★★★
NBA Live 2006	03/05	★★★★
Need for Speed Underground 2	04/05	★★★★
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager	03/05	★★★★
Obscure	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Painkiller: Battle out of Hell	02/05	★★★★
Pariah	09/05	★★★★
Pitfall: The Lost Expedition	01/05	★★★★
Playboy: The Mansion	04/05	★★★★
Prince of Persia: Warrior Within	03/05	★★★★
Project Snowblind	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Psychonauts	06/05	★★★★
Psychotoxic	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Raging Tiger	04/05	★★★★
Return to Mysterious Island	04/05	★★★★
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3	02/05	★★★★
The Saga of Ryzom	01/05	★★★★
Second Sight	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Secret of the Silver Earring	01/05	★★★★
Sentinel: Descendants in Time	04/05	★★★★

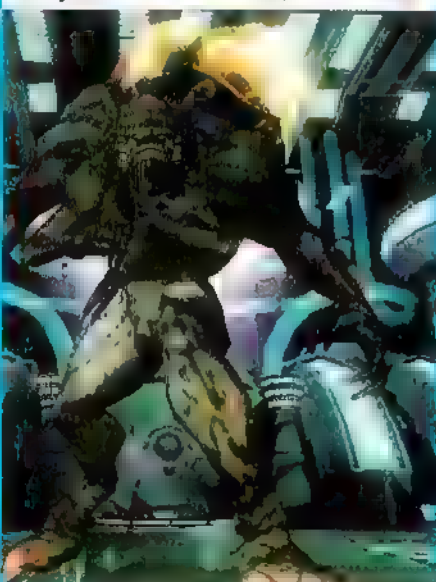
GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Sid Meier's Pirates!	02/05	★★★★
Silent Hill 4: The Room	01/05	★★★★
Silent Hunter III	06/05	★★★★
The Sims 2: University	05/05	★★★★
Space Interceptor: Project Freedom	02/05	★★★★
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	06/05	★★★★
The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie	02/05	★★★★
Star Wars KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	04/05	★★★★
Star Wars Republic Commando	05/05	★★★★
Stronghold 2	08/05	★★★★
SuperPower 2	02/05	★★★★
Supremacy	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
SWAT 4	06/05	★★★★
Time of Defiance	04/05	★★★★
Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great	04/05	★★★★
Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar	09/05	★★★★
TrackMania Sunrise	08/05	★★★★
Ultima Online: Samurai Empire	02/05	★★★★
Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	02/05	★★★★
Vendetta Online	05/05	★★★★
World Championship Tennis	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
World Soccer Winning Eleven 8 International	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Zoo Tycoon 2	02/05	★★★★



• FlatOut



• Stronghold 2



• Area 51

WHAT IF YOU COULD WIN EVERYTHING IN SYNC MAGAZINE?



IN SEPTEMBER, YOU CAN

Go to your local newsstand or bookstore to pick up an issue.
See official rules at syncmagwinit.com

SO YOU SAY YOU NEED A NEW PC? OF course you do. Because it's a new month now, and that means your formerly kick-ass PC is already getting out-of-date. This month, we take a look at three new rigs from boutique PC makers that specialize in the kind of hardcore rigs for gamers that will keep you happy for—literally—months!

CYBERPOWER GAMER ULTRA XLC

CyberPower builds gaming systems for the masses and, miraculously, does it at a reasonable price. Take the new Gamer Ultra XLC (pictured at far right). It stands alone as a tuner's dream: It's the equivalent of a modded-out, high-performance street racer at the price of a Yugo. The \$2,999 is a price only home PC builders usually touch, but with the XLC, you get a full warranty and tech support for backup. And here's the crazy part: This price includes shipping and a copy of *Half-Life 2*.

Like Mangle's monster, the F131, this system highlights the AMD Athlon 64 FX-57 CPU with HyperTransport technology and two Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX graphics cards. This combo has earned some of the highest benchmarks we've ever seen. For the 3DMark05 benchmark test, it not only surpassed the 8,000 mark, but blew way past it at an unbelievable final score of 11,920. Then, as if just warming up, it scored a

PRICE
\$2,650

The Guts Gamer Ultra XLC

COMPONENTS	
Processor	AMD FX 57
Case	Aspire aluminum X-Navigator
Motherboard	Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe
Memory	Two Western Digital 10,000 rpm 740GB Raptor 74GB SATA hard drives, Maxtor 250GB data drive
Power supply	RAID-0, Maxtor 250GB Data Drive
Video	Two Nvidia 7800GTX 256MB
Audio	Onboard eight-channel audio
Optical	Sony DVD-RW, Sony DVD
Speakers	Creative Labs inspire P7800 speakers
Peripherals	6-in-1 media card reader, floppy disk drive
Keyboard	Microsoft wireless keyboard and mouse
Power supply	Enermax SLI-ready power supply
Cooling	Cooler Master Liquid-Cooling kit
OS	Windows XP Pro
Service	One-year on-site service



mind-blowing 3DGG Lite score of 100.5. The *Far Cry* benchmark alone hit 120fps, with the Research map flying high at 135fps. Even the *Doom 3* score overshot the 130fps mark.

For added overclocking bliss, CyberPower cools the processor with Cooler Master's discreet water-cooling kit. The system also houses

the renowned Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard for top-notch computing power. CyberPower includes a pair of Western Digital Raptor 10,000 rpm HDD in RAID 0 and ups the ante by adding a Maxtor 250GB SATA hard drive for file backup and management. The system uses the Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe onboard

COOL RIGS

Three fat gaming PCs in one place? Damn, we love this job!

PRICE
\$2,999

PRICE
\$4,927



eight-channel audio instead of Creative's Audigy 2 card. Thankfully, it sounds good with the bundled Creative Labs P7800 speaker kit.

If the Gamer Ultra XLC has a blemish, it's the Aspire X-Navigator server case, which consists of breakable, swappable faceplates, cheaply designed bays, and a rather noisy 78 dB plastic enclosure. Fortunately, buyers have a plethora of alternative case choices, so I highly recommend spending the extra money to get the noise down to acceptable levels and improve the XLC's looks. The original case does offer an LED thermal temp display, three extra LED fans, a cool cathode-ray tube, and a fan control dial for notable enhancements in both functionality and mod-like aesthetics. And gone are the messy wiring schemes found in previous CyberPower entries. Add CyberPower's one-year on-site tech support warranty and you have a high-end gaming system

that will keep you satisfied for a long time.

The Gamer Ultra XLC is what high-end gaming should be—kick-ass and affordable. If you crave SLI horsepower and the newest enthusiast level processor and videocards for ultimate performance, then buy this. Now. Seriously. Don't be an idiot. /

Gamer Ultra XLC \$2,999

Best bargain for a monster machine!



PRICE
INDEX

Prices for products not purchased directly from manufacturers were the lowest we found by shopping on tUP.com.

INSIDE



Daimyo PSND2-SLI Notebook
Sleek, stylish, and fast new gaming laptop.



AMD Athlon FX-57
Dude, it's, like, the fastest gaming CPU ever!

Making Sense of 3D GameGauge Lite

Each system goes through an exhaustive series of benchmark tests in order to assess overall performance and raw speed values. Benchmarking consists of both the industry's undisputed reference synthetic benchmark utility, 3DMark05, along with CGW's own real-world game benchmarking suite, 3D GameGauge Lite. 3DGG Lite consists of a brilliant collection of A-List action games like *Halo*, *Doom 3*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *Far Cry*, and *Painkiller*. 3DGG video configurations are set at the 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled, except for *Halo*, which gets no benefit from either technique. Results are then tabulated and posted as a raw Geomean score for your reference.

3D GameGauge Lite



HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. During that time, the lowest 3D GameGauge score we've seen is 40; as of now, the highest is 100.6.



MAINGEAR F131

Upstart PC manufacturer Maingear came out swinging this year. In its first time in our Ultimate Gaming Machine competition, the company almost knocked Voodoo PC out of first place. Almost, apparently, isn't good enough. After going back to the drawing board, it's officially created a monster. Aided by a super-water-cooling setup, the F131 beat top benchmark scores in 3DGameGauge Lite. The only question we have is: "Umm, you got \$5,000 bucks you can loan us?"

For those still without an AMD-based gaming rig, it's time to step up. Maingear proves that when you combine an AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 processor and Nvidia's NForce4 SLI media and communication processor (MCP) setup, you get a deadly one-two punch that's felt in the games. In this case, the F131 employs the ultrapowerful Asus A8N-SLI motherboard and two Nvidia

MANUFACTURER: Maingear
PRODUCT: F131

GeForce 6800 GT Ultra PCI Express videocards in SLI. The results—an impressive 3DGG score of 90.12, as well as a remarkable 3DMark05 score of 7,863—speak for themselves. More specifically, *Halo* and *Doom 3* frames shot high into the 120s. Of course, two Western Digital Raptor 10,000 rpm SATA hard drives in RAID 0 striping certainly help push the gaming envelope. Maingear was also savvy enough to include an additional 7,200 rpm SATA HDD for backing up your important data, giving the F131 functionality as well as performance.

It's usually hard to keep a machine with this much muscle quiet—or cool. Not only does the F131 pull this feat off, it does so with style. The black chassis is a quiet case at 53 dB, and thanks to an awesome CPU water-cooling kit from Arctic, you won't be waking up the neighborhood with 20 roaring fans attached to the case. Unlike the other PC cooling kits featured in this issue, the Arctic Liquid Cooler system is one of those rare PC components that looks like it belongs on somebody's pimped-out ride while remaining extremely functional. Beyond its red UV dye, fancy tubing, and tricked-out front-panel reservoir, this is the way to test the overclocking limits of an AMD processor.

This is a serious gaming rig for those who aren't shy about spending top dollar. Very top dollar. But it won me over and, like the recently reviewed Velocity Micro Gamer's Edge DualX and Vicious PC Paladin SLI systems, earns a spot among the plethora of AMD Athlon 64-based SLI systems housed at the Cave (my insane subterranean PC workshop). And if a rig is Cave-worthy, it's worth checking out.

The Guts F131

COMPONENTS	
CPU	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 processor
Case	Maingear F131 SLI chassis and Maingear LED lighting and acrylic window package
Motherboard	Asus A8N SLI motherboard with NForce4 chipset
Memory	1GB Corsair TwinX 3200LL Pro DDR memory
Hard drive	Two Western Digital 740GD Raptor 74GB SATA 10,000RPM • RAID-0 (striped), Western Digital 320GB SATA Hard Drive
Videocard	Two Nvidia 6800 Ultra 256MB SLI videocards
Sound	Creative Labs Audigy 2 ZS
Optical drive	NEC Dual Layer 16x DVD+ R/RW
Accessories	7-in-1 Flash card reader/1.44MB floppy combo drive
Peripherals	Microsoft Multimedia Keyboard and Razer optical mouse
Power supply	Enermax 600-watt S.L.I.
Cooling	Maingear Arctic Liquid Cooler system
OS	Microsoft Windows XP Home Edition with CD and manual

3D GameGauge Lite



F131 \$4,927

Keep cool while you roast the competition

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★★

The Guts Gamer X64

COMPONENTS	
CPU	Intel Pentium D 840 Extreme
Case	RaidMax 668 case with liquid cooling
Motherboard	Intel D855XB motherboard
Memory	1024MB (512 x 2) DDR-2 667
Hard drive	256GB Seiko ATA hard drive
Videocard	nVidia GeForce 6800 Ultra Graphics 256MB PCI-Express
Sound	Onboard 7.1 Channel Surround Sound, Logitech X-5500 surround sound speakers
Optical drive	16x DVD-ROM Drive, 16x Double Layer/Dual Format DVD+/- RW drive
Accessories	8-in-1 media card reader/writer, floppy disk drive
Peripherals	Logitech LX700 wireless KB and optical mouse
Monitor	19-inch ViewSonic VX921 LCD monitor
OS	Microsoft Windows XP Professional x64-bit edition
Warranty	Three-year Limited Warranty + First-year iCare Deluxe 24/7 on-site service

3D GameGauge Lite



Gamer X64 \$2,650

Windows XP x64 makes the Gamer X64 a far-from-perfect gaming system.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★★

sidering the heavy-duty components this rig sports, including the Pentium D 840 Extreme CPU. In time, games will start supporting the Windows XP x64 OS, so it's possible that in a few months, we'll see better results from systems like the Gamer X64.

iBuyPower also chose the wrong processor for a dual-core gaming rig. Scores lingered in the range of 65 to 70 fps, with *Painkiller* and *UT2004* particularly demonstrating how the Intel Pentium D 840 falls behind AMD's Dual Core X2 processor for gaming. If iBuyPower had gone with AMD, which the company does carry, the machine would have performed better in spite of the 64-bit version of Windows XP.

Finally, iBuyPower continues to use cheaply made RaidMax cases. OK, they're priced right and come with plenty of cooling features and upgrading room. But when your PC is pumping out 70 dB of noise, plastic does little to quiet things down. And though iBuyPower cleaned up its usual messy tangle of wires, future upgrading ventures that involve fitting components around poorly structured case parts will test your dexterity and patience.

iBuyPower is among the best at building inexpensive high-performance rigs, like the Zillion Pro system. Unfortunately, the Gamer X64 comes up short. If you really need an Intel-based 64-bit gaming machine right now, this system's low price point might make it an attractive option for you. My advice? Wait for Vista before jumping on the x64 bandwagon / Raphael Liberatore

“UM, YOU GOT 5,000 BUCKS YOU CAN LOAN US?”

EXTERNAL HARD-DRIVE-O-RAMA

We pick our favorite external HDD

WITH GAME INSTALLATIONS HOARDING THE MAJORITY OF your hard-drive space, adding more storage without the hassle of breaking open your box and mounting another hard drive is a plus. External hard-disk drives with USB 2.0 or FireWire (IEEE 1394) support are the quickest, easiest, and most elegant choices for adding storage to your system without the sloppy tangle of wires.

A current external hard disk drive comes with much larger capacities than a 250GB IDE hard drive and can double as a system backup drive. External drives are also designed for convenient stacking, and the price per gigabyte makes them even more attractive.

Both FireWire and USB protocols are hotswappable, plug-and-play ready, and can be daisy-chained together, but the updated FireWire IEEE 1394b protocol is the most desirable option thanks to sustained and zippy 800Mbps transfer speeds; USB 2.0 at 480Mbps transfers data slightly faster than FireWire IEEE 1394a at 400Mbps, however, FireWire's guaranteed transfer rate is especially useful for streaming video and/or high-end game applications. / Raphael Liberatore

MANUFACTURER: LaCie INTERFACE: USB 2.0, FireWire 800, FireWire 400, iLink CAPACITY: 1,000GB (1TB) at 7,200 rpm PRICE: \$849

LACIE D2 BIG DISK EXTREME WITH TRIPLE INTERFACE

WHY: This is one huge terabyte encased in a classy external hard-drive box running 800Mbps data transfer rates at 7,200 rpm speeds. With size, speed, and style, it's like driving the new supercharged Range Rover.

MANUFACTURER: LaCie INTERFACE: USB 2.0, FireWire 800, FireWire 400, iLink CAPACITY: 500GB at 7,200 rpm PRICE: \$399

LACIE D2 BIG DISK WITH TRIPLE INTERFACE

WHY: Cutting-edge sophistication and speed for those who want a smaller version of LaCie's extreme-sized brother. LaCie's *SilverStreak* HDD utility and the drive's sophisticated looks make it my favorite of the bunch.

MANUFACTURER: Axio INTERFACE: USB 2.0, 3.5-inch IDE HDD, UDMA 33/66 or ATA 100/133 CAPACITY: Depends on PATA IDE HDD size PRICE: \$49.95 (Hard drive not included)

ENC-302U USB 2.0 EXTERNAL HARD DRIVE KIT

WHY: This nifty external enclosure supports a single internal 3.5-inch IDE HDD (sold separately). The total cost of both the \$50 kit and a \$80 IDE hard drive (not included) makes it the least-expensive storage option in the

roundup. However, good luck finding one online, and setting it up also means work.

MANUFACTURER: Western Digital INTERFACE: USB 2.0, FireWire 800, 8-in-1 memory card reader, iLink CAPACITY: 250GB at 7,200 rpm PRICE: \$230

WDXF2500JB MEDIA CENTER

WHY: Perfect for the home network or multimedia room, the Media Center offers multiple interfaces with lots of backup button options and a fail-safe emergency shutdown with error detection feature. Western Digital even sweetens the deal with a built-in memory card reader.

MANUFACTURER: Western Digital CAPACITY: 80GB at 5,400 rpm INTERFACE: USB 2.0 PRICE: \$165

PASSPORT PORTABLE USB DRIVE

WHY: A tiny, lightweight drive suited for the gamer on the go who wants something that fits in a notebook bag. But it's really SLOW, and the smallish 80GB size is pricey.

One good turn does not deserve another.

Addicted to Sid Meier's Civilization PC games? Finally, there is hope.



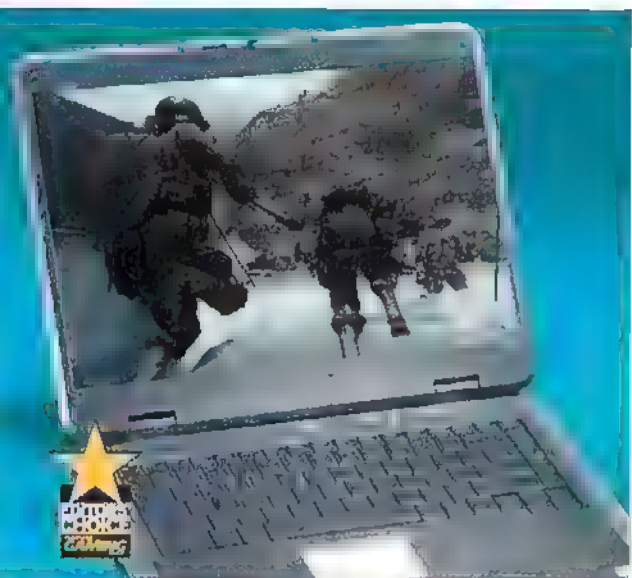
www.CivAnon.org

No more turns.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Enroll before November. Local meetings are filling up.





▲ JGAL UREN Vicious PC
UC Daimyo P5ND2-SLI Deluxe Notebook ▲

THE VICIOUS PC DAIMYO LAPTOP MIGHT not be the most powerful laptop we've reviewed, but it's a stylish performer at a good price, with enough high-end components to make it plenty fast for gaming. That said, the main reasons

for an affordable laptop for gaming, then the Daimyo is your best choice at the moment

GATEWAY'S SLIM ALTERNATIVE

Every now and then Gateway throws a bone to the

THE DAIMYO PERFECTLY BALANCES PORTABILITY AND PERFORMANCE.

For performance, Vicious PC includes Intel's Centrino Pentium M 2.13GHz mobile processor at 80nm (code-named Dothan). The Daimyo may not be as fast as those "gaming" notebooks built to accommodate desktop processors, but its L2 cache easily spits out benchmarks at a respectable 3D GameGauge Lite score of 48. Add one gig of Kingston PC-4200 RAM and the new GeForce Go 6600 128MB PCI Express graphics card, and you have the kind of punch necessary for running *Painkiller* at 80fps in full graphical splendor.

As a bonus, the Daimyo's lithium-ion battery can run three-plus hours of *SWAT 4* takedowns before running out. If you're looking

with a rather large 17-inch Ultrabright WSXGA+ LCD monitor, yet still weighs in at eight pounds. From a strictly performance standard, the M680XL, with its 1GB of 400MHz DDR2 memory (expandable to two gigs) and Hitachi 60GB 7200 rpm Ultra ATA HDD, did a fair job with our suite of 3D GameGauge Lite benchmarks, reaching a raw score of 37. *Painkiller* flexed some serious game performance at 72fps, while *Doom 3*, on the other hand, ran at a less-spectacular 24fps. For the most part, though, the M680XL does a decent job of doubling as a gaming machine.

The M680XL comes stacked with an assortment of software, including Windows XP Pro with SP2, Microsoft Works 8.0, an assortment of antivirus and antispayware packages, and DVD-ROM burning utility.

P5ND2-SLI Deluxe \$1,899

Sleek, fast, and boasting more-than-decent battery life, the Daimyo is a great gaming laptop.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★

WHEN LAPTOP MEANS LAPTOP

Daimyo P5ND2-SLI Deluxe Notebook and Gateway M680XL Notebook

I'm enamored with the Daimyo are its portable ergonomics, lightweight package, and long-lasting lithium-ion battery—the very features that make laptops desirable in the first place. The Daimyo perfectly balances portability and performance.

The Daimyo's compact and versatile aluminum case is available in a handful of colors, and its featherweight six pounds is a nice break from the behemoth 14-pound laptops we've been reviewing lately. The 15.4-inch WSXGA 1680x1050 widescreen LCD display, with its ambient light sensor that automatically adjusts for dark or well-lit rooms, has enough real estate for playing epic *Rome: Total War* battles.

gaming community. Its new M680XL notebook with Intel's flagship Centrino Pentium M 770 2.13GHz Dothan processor and ATI's Mobility Radeon X700 128MB GDDR3 RAM graphics card is as an example of consumer-level computing gone gaming. Though it's not as fast as Dell's top-of-the-line XPS Gen 2 notebook, and it's just a tad slower than Vicious PC's Daimyo, it still offers plenty of speed for mobile gamers needing a quick *Counter-Strike* fix across a network using either its integrated Broadcom Gigabit Ethernet adapter or 56k modem.

The M680XL's best feature is its looks. It's sleek and thin and easy to stow in a backpack. It comes

ies. Yeah, it's a little pricier than the Daimyo, but for mainstream computing with gaming on the side, the M680XL won't disappoint. / Raphael Liberatore

Gateway M680XL \$2,565

Gateway's notebook for the gaming masses does decent job, but doesn't wow.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★

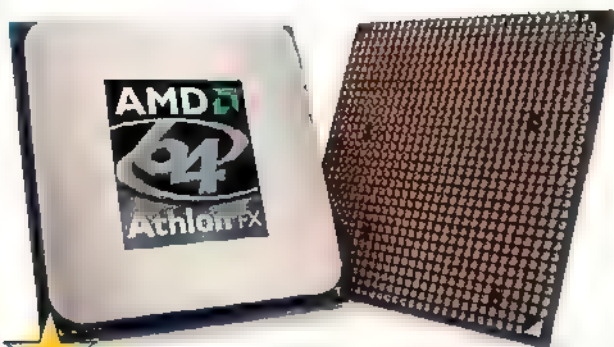
BATTLE OF THE NOTEBOOK VIDEOCARDS: GEFORCE VERSUS ATI

When looking at benchmarks from *Painkiller*, *Doom 3*, and *SWAT 4*, the Daimyo with the GeForce Go 6600 and the Gateway M680XL with the ATI Mobility Radeon X700 are extremely similar. Both notebooks produced midrange desktop performance results in games like *Painkiller*, but showed off much higher scores in *SWAT 4*. However, the GeForce Go 6600 pushed the Daimyo ahead, running *Doom 3* with a righteous performance of 77fps, as opposed to the M680XL's 62fps.

Looking at both notebooks from a gaming standpoint, Vicious PC's Daimyo notebook with GeForce Go 6600 is ahead of the Gateway M680XL. It's the better choice for gamers looking for an affordable laptop that can hold its own and play with the best midrange desktop computers.



▲ JGAL UREN Vicious PC
UC Daimyo P5ND2-SLI Deluxe Notebook ▲



MANUFACTURER AMD
PRODUCT Athlon 64 FX-57 2.8GHz Socket 939
90nm "San Diego" CPU

THE FASTEST GAMING CPU EVER!

Athlon 64 FX-57 2.8GHz Socket 939 90nm
"San Diego" CPU

➤ THE CPU IS WITHOUT A DOUBT THE MOST CRITICAL COMPONENT in a bleeding-fast system. Conduct a survey gauging which CPU graces the majority of ultrafast systems today, and I'm sure you'll find AMD's chips in most setups. And AMD has just taken another step toward preserving its dominance in the ongoing processor wars: the Athlon 64 FX-57, the company's latest high-performance juggernaut.

The FX-57 arrives packing a wallop, with vast architecture improvements over AMD's previous flagship CPU, the FX-55. Technically speaking, the FX-57 offers an integrated 128-bit wide memory controller, along with a 90nm manufactured processing core with strained silicon-on-insulator (SOI) technology, giving CPU-hungry gamers improved thermal properties and speed performance boosts. It also sports a transistor count of 114 million compared to the FX-55's 105.9 million, and it jumps from 2.6GHz to 2.8GHz. Simply stated, it's a lightning-fast

➤ WITH ITS UNPRECEDENTED PERFORMANCE, THE FX-57 COULD DELIVER THE COUP DE GRÂCE AGAINST INTEL.

processor that runs games at lickety-split speeds. For example, the FX-57 gave me 14 more frames per second in *UT2004* than the FX-55 did...and that was without overclocking the CPU (another AMD option and specialty). Overclocking nabbed me another 7fps. Too cool!

With its unprecedented performance, the FX-57 could deliver the coup de grâce against Intel, at least in gotta-have-the-best gaming circles. As the processor wars rage on, Texas-based AMD continues to set the bar for high-end gaming for the foreseeable future. /Raphael Liberator

Athlon 64 FX-57 \$1,025

Unprecedented gaming performance.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★

You won't stop playing until you *want* to stop playing.

Addicted to Sid Meier's Civilization PC games?
Finally, there is hope.

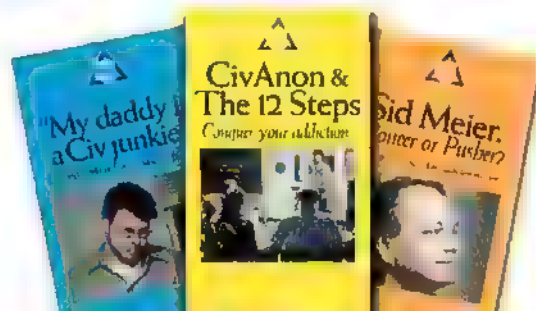


www.CivAnon.org

No more turns.

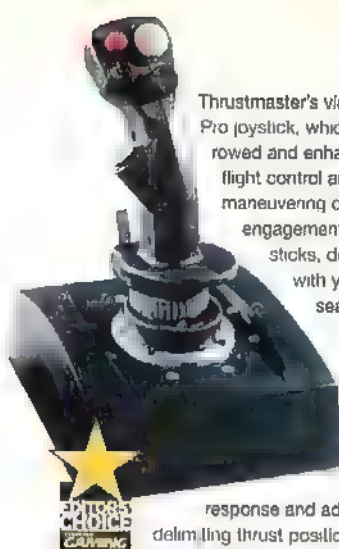
IMPORTANT NOTE:

Enroll before November. Local meetings are filling up.





MANUFACTURED BY Thrustmaster
Model: HOTAS Cougar Flight Control
System ▲



Thrustmaster's vintage high-quality F-22 Pro joystick, which Thrustmaster has borrowed and enhanced here for better flight control and plane-of-motion maneuvering during intense air-to-air engagements. With lesser-quality sticks, dogfights more often end with you hitting the ejection-seat release button.

The HOTAS offers a host of switches and triggers for added control and programmability. It also supports five full-speed USB interfaces for rapid

response and adjustable detents for delimiting thrust positions, delivering full military power during hairy maneuvers. It also sports a 24MHz internal processor for accumulating up to 16

FIGHTER JOCKS ONLY

HOTAS Cougar Flight Control System

IF YOU'RE A VIRTUAL PILOT LIKE ME, THEN you've logged sorties in everything from F-16 and MIG-25 fighter jets to Cessna Skymasters, acrobatic biplanes, and Boeing "Triple Seven" airliners. After hundreds of hours of airtime, you learn that a quality joystick and throttle combo means being able to perfect traps and shoots (aircraft carrier terminology) or reenact Battle of Britain dogfights. The excellent HOTAS Cougar from Thrustmaster, with its superior construction, performance, functionality, and programming, delivers just what flight-sim aficionados are looking for: an affordable joystick/throttle combo that will win you dogfights.

Modeled after the flight stick and throttle of the U.S. Air Force's F-16 Falcon fighter jet, the Thrustmaster HOTAS is constructed of metal from top to bottom, including buttons, high-hat switches, and internal springs. Even the HOTAS' lettering is a quality highlight. As a matter of fact, veteran aces may recall the superior tension performance from

macros at various real-time settings, nifty self-adjusting calibration profiles, and 64KB of external memory for storing an assortment of calibration, joy stick, and memory data files.

The only things missing from this marvelous setup are rudders, but thankfully it supports all third-party rudders with USB connectivity.

With its stellar build quality and the look and feel of the real thing, this HOTAS handles with surefire precision and control, making it the best combo joystick and throttle, bar none. /Raphael Liberatore

HOTAS Cougar \$129

Like the Commando, it's tough and untouchable.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★

HIGHWAY STAR

Trackstar 6000GT Auto Racing Simulation Controller

IT'S TRUE YOU CAN EITHER BUY ECCI'S Trackstar 6000GT \$900-plus steering wheel or just put a down payment on a real car, but if you're the most hardcore auto-racing-sim addict, that's a tough choice. Tooted like a race car's steering column, this all-metal beauty jumps off the line with accurate car control and a fierce-looking chassis.

ECCI has fashioned numerous high-end driving rigs since the mid 1990s, and the Trackstar 6000GT is the company's equivalent of the Saleen S7—it's the be-all, end-all car controller. It weighs in at 50-odd pounds, so make sure you've got a big, sturdy table. You'll also need around 90 minutes just to piece it all together. And did we mention it's expensive?

So why even consider it? Stability, for one reason. Unlike so many racing systems, the Trackstar won't budge. Clamp the wheel to the desk and place the massive pedal unit into position, and there they shall stay. And that stability is internal, too: There are no fragile bungee cords, plastic gears, or dime-store pots here (pots = slang for brake parts). Instead, ECCI utilizes components such as camshafts, high-definition military-grade pots, friction-eliminating ball bearings, and a leather-wrapped real automobile wheel that alone retails for \$150.

Of course, most of us are not this hardcore, but we can appreciate the Trackstar 6000GT's beauty, exclaim, "It costs how much?!" and leave it at that. The rest of you, have a great time.

/Raphael Liberatore

Buy, Speed, Buy
Check out page
81 for a game
that actually
does this thing
justice.



MANUFACTURED BY Extreme Competition Controls Inc.
Model: Trackstar 6000GT Auto Racing Simulation
Controller ▲

Trackstar 6000GT \$958

For more, better racing realism.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★

Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

The mere notion of keeping current with the gazillion patches and game add-ons sucks the life out of me, especially if I'm at some download site, stuck in a queue waiting for my turn. I'd rather just play an outdated game than wait for a download to finish. Thank goodness VIA Technologies has teamed up with GameShadow to offer an outstanding patch-tracking program. Grease Monkey replaces the time-draining chore of patching games and system drivers with a simple mouse click.

Grease Monkey (and GameShadow) requires a modest yearly fee of \$14.95. (GameShadow also provides a streamlined Extended Play version for free.) Both versions support over 1,200 games and feature hundreds of demos, news feeds, game reviews, and video drivers. The last feature is particularly intriguing, as GameShadow compares video drivers with a performance rating of top-rated games, so you can key in on the best possible graphics driver for your gaming enjoyment.

Configuring Grease Monkey is easy: I ran a search, and within minutes the program discovered over 90 games on my rig in need of patches. I was not only amazed by how many forgotten games were sitting on my hard drive, but also couldn't believe how many lacked the most recent updates. Better still, I was able to grab cool mods and popular conversions for games such as *SWAT 4* and *Three Kingdoms 2004* without having to do multiple searches across the Web.

Grease Monkey can be downloaded at www.viagreasemonkey.com or www.gameshadow.com. /Raphael Liberatore

SONY IS THE UNDISPUTED KING OF top-of-the-line televisions. So when the company marries high-end features from its top televisions with superbright and vivid LCD monitor lines, what should we expect? A spectacular combination of gaming and home-theater visual power, that's what. Sony's MFM-HT95 19-inch HDTV-ready LCD TV and PC display is a sizzling solution for gamers who use their PC for more than just gaming.

From top to bottom, this monitor possesses key characteristics necessary for rock-solid gaming. With a 12ms response rate, 450 cd/m² Xbrite technology, and an awe-inspiring 1000-to-1 contrast ratio at 1280x1024 resolution, it displays shooters like *Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil* without any of the ghosting or jaggies typically attributed to LCDs with slower response rates. And when you switch over to your DVD player with the fully featured remote, your living room television suddenly feels like a third wheel.

The MFM-HT95 turns an attractive LCD into a multimedia command center. It offers

all the capabilities of a high-definition NTSC television, including premium-quality built-in 2.1 SRS WOW 3D speakers and subwoofer, along with a headphone jack. So, if you need to preserving precious desk space for pencil holders, soda cans, and coffee mugs, you'll be quite pleased with the speakers' sound detail.

High picture quality is a Sony tradition, and the MFM-HT95 provides the visual pizzazz of HDTV. Watching the Discovery Channel in full HD detail amazed even a home-theater purist like me. But in order to pipe in your favorite high-definition programming feeds at 576i, 576p, and all the way to 720p and 1080i resolutions, you must connect a separate HDTV tuner or decoder. Thankfully, the monitor sports a versatile collection of composite input connection terminals for configuring all kinds of components. For the space-starved gamer, there's even a bracket for mounting it on the wall.

With its spectacular array of multimedia features and performance enhancements,



the MFM-HT95 is still a pricey LCD choice at \$795. However, if convergence is your thing, and you want your PC to stand in as your entertainment system, then this is your monitor. Knowing it's from Sony, the only question worth considering is whether your desk chair doubles as a throne.
/Raphael Liberatore

THE CONTORTIONIST

Sony MFM-HT95 19-inch HDTV-ready LCD TV/PC Display

Sony MFM-HT95 \$795

A happy marriage of multimedia and PC gaming.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★★

A-LIST

CPU

Best Performance Processor

AMD Athlon 64 FX 57 (AMD - www.amd.com - \$1,110)

Best Budget Processor

AMD Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz "Winchester" 90nm CPU (AMD - www.amd.com - \$256)

MOTHERBOARDS

Best Performance Motherboard

Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe Motherboard (Asus - www.asus.com - \$162)

Best Budget Motherboard

Chaintech VN74 Ultra Zenith VE Motherboard (Chaintech - www.chaintechusa.com - \$81)

GRAPHICS CARDS

Best Performance Graphics Card for AGP

ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition 256MB AGP GDDR3 (ATI Technologies - www.ati.com - \$397)

Best Performance Graphics Card for PCI Express

BFG Technologies GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB PCI Express GDDR3 (BFGTech - www.bfgtech.com - \$436)

Best Budget Graphics Card

BFG Technologies GeForce 6800 GT OC 128MB AGP GDDR3 (BFGTech - www.bfgtech.com - \$211)

RAM

Best Performance DDR RAM

Corsair Memory AM 2 x 512MB PC4000 DDR RAM (TWIXX1024-4400C25) (Corsair - www.corsairmicro.com - \$205)

Best Performance DDR2 RAM

Corsair Memory XMS2 TwinX 1GB DDR2 RAM (TWIX21024A-5400UL) (Corsair - www.corsairmicro.com - \$280)

Best Budget DDR RAM

Kingston 512MB PC3500 DDR RAM (KH3500A/512) (Kingston - www.kingston.com - \$73)

HARD DRIVES

Best Performance Internal Hard Drive

Hitachi Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm SATA II NCQ

Hard Drive (Hitachi - www.hitachi.com - \$290)

Best Performance External Hard Drive

LaCie 300703U 250GB FireWire Hard Drive (LaCie - www.lacie.com - \$164)

MONITORS

Best LCD

Dell UltraSharp 2405FPW 24-inch Flat Panel LCD Monitor (Dell - www.dell.com - \$1,299)

Best Budget LCD

NEC Display Solutions MultiSync LCD1970GX 19-inch Flat Panel LCD Monitor (NEC Mitsubishi - www.necdisplay.com - \$514)

Best CRT

NEC MultiSync FE2119S 22-inch CRT Conventional Monitor (NEC - www.necdisplay.com - \$269)

SOUND

Best Soundcard

Creative Labs Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro Soundcard (Creative Labs - www.creative.com - \$197)

Best Budget Soundcard

Mad Dog Multimedia 7.1 DSP Soundcard (Mad Dog - www.mdog.com - \$79)

Best Speaker System

Creative Labs ProGamer G500 5.1 Computer Speakers (Creative Labs - www.creative.com - \$199)

Best Budget Speaker System

GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1 Speaker System (Creative Labs - www.creative.com - \$240)

Best Headphones

Zalman Tech ZM-RSGF Consumer Headphones (Zalman - www.zalmanusa.com - \$42)

GAME DEVICES/PERIPHERALS

Best Gaming Mouse (Ho)

Razer Diamondback (RZ1810) Mouse (Razer - www.razerzone.com - \$41)

Logitech MX518 PC Gaming-Grade Optical Mouse (Logitech - www.logitech.com - \$38)

Best Mouse Pad

SteelPad 4D RTL Mouse Pad (Soft Trading - www.steelpad.com - \$20)

Best Gaming Keyboard

Saitek (PZ08A) Gamers Keyboard (Saitek - www.saitek.com - \$37)

Best Wireless Keyboard-Mouse Combo

Logitech Cordless Desktop MX3100 (Logitech - www.logitech.com - \$108)

Best Joystick

CH Products CH Fighterstick USB (200-57142) (CH Products - www.chproducts.com - \$100)

Best Wireless Gamepad

Logitech Cordless Rumblepad 2 (963328-0403) (Logitech - www.logitech.com - \$29)

Best Racing Wheel

Logitech MOMO Racing Wheel and Pedals Set (963328-0403) (Logitech - www.logitech.com - \$66)

NETWORKING

Best Gaming Router

D-Link GamerLounge DGL-4300 Wireless Router (079006927255) (D-Link - www.d-link.com - \$170)

Best Switch

SMC8508T EZ Switch 8-port 10/100/1000 Gbabit Unmanaged Switch (SMC - www.smc.com - \$71)

Best Network Adapter

Belkin Pre-N MIMO 802.11g/b Wireless Notebook Adapter (Belkin - www.belkin.com - \$60)

GAMING NOTEBOOKS

Best Performance Notebook

Dell Inspiron XPS Gen 2 PC Notebook (Dell - www.dell.com - \$2,400)

Best Budget Notebook

Vicious PC Daimyo Notebook (Vicious PC - www.vicious-pc.com - \$1,700)



KILLER RIG

—Ah. All we need now is a bag of Doritos, a Mountain Dew, and a fatty, and we're good to go.

Water-Cooled Kandalf i-SLI

THE KANDALF i-SLI KILLER RIG IS THE fastest Intel system to date. With two GeForce 6800 Ultra cards running in SLI, it races through the most demanding games with ease. Since we've been so pleased with it, we decided to rerun it as the foundation for this month's Killer Rig. This time around, we added more hard drives and some new DDR2 RAM modules from Corsair. We also jumped on this month's water-cooling theme by installing one of Corsair's cooling kits.

We started by doubling up on one of the fastest hard drives available—Western Digital's 10,000 rpm Raptor SATA HDD—for gaming at superfast read/write speeds. Since we're already running a RAID striping configuration with the Hitachi SATA hard drives, we needed to start from scratch by creating a RAID (0+1) data striping and mirroring setup. It was a tricky enterprise to match two separate SATA channels in both SATA and SATA II, but after futzing around with BIOS and RAID settings for a couple of hours, we managed to get everything up and running pretty smoothly. Next we tackled RAM, swapping the Corsair 5400UL DDR2 RAM for 1GB of Corsair's Twin XMS2 6400 matched memory sticks. This RAM is rated at an incredible 800MHz, with a 5-5-5-12 latency. Since our Asus motherboard is highly overclockable, this RAM does the trick when it comes to netting fast framerates in games like *Doom 3* and *Far Cry*.

Since Corsair was in a giving mood this month, we dumped the Zalman heat sink and fan for a Corsair PC water-cooling kit. This marked our second experience with water-cooling installa-

tion, and it was a much easier experience this time, thanks to Corsair's detailed instructions and complete supply of appropriate components. The kit has everything: a pump, reservoir, radiator, tubing, and also a copper water block, which is compatible with both LGA775 and AMD Athlon XP processors. Since the radiator protrudes from the back of the case, the full-tower Kandalf case stuck out further than desired on our desktop. Fortunately, the chassis is tall, when we placed it on the floor, we were still able to reach the DVD trays with ease. The upgrade took more than a day—longer than expected—with the RAID configuration and water-cooling setup absorbing most of the time.

Once we fired up our Killer Rig, we were impressed by how much quieter this system ran. Considering how many vents and screens this case has, the 50 dB was validation of the added serenity of water cooling. After reinstalling Windows XP Professional, a slew of driver upgrades, and a few benchmarking programs for performance tests, we were just about ready to go. To avoid crashes—which are usually attributed to poor thermal dissipation settings or extreme heat caused from overclocking—we tweaked the CPU. Mission accomplished.

As this is an SLI system sporting two GeForce 6800 Ultra videocards, we managed to gain substantial speed gains with pretty much every game we fired up. Framerates in *Doom 3* moved past 107fps, while the Research map in *Far Cry* ran at an impressive 142fps, topping all systems to date. In short, Intel fans will definitely see some remarkable

results here. This rig has also turned us into bona fide water-cooling fans (no pun intended)—If you're an overclocker, there's simply no better alternative.

/ Raphael Liberatore

The Guts

	COMPONENTS	PRICE
CASE	Thermaltake Kandalf aluminum full-tower case with window panel	\$120
OS	Corsair Cool Water Cooling Kit	\$120
OS	Microsoft Windows XP Professional	\$200
POWER	PC Power & Cooling 510-watt TB1SLI power supply	\$40
PROCESSOR	Intel Pentium 4 680 3.73GHz processor	\$180
MOTHERBOARD	Asus P5ND7 SLI PCI Express Motherboard with 7.1 audio, Gigabit LAN, RAID/Serial ATA	\$140
MEMORY	Corsair XMS2 5400UL 675MHz 2 x 512 MB DDR memory (1GB total; 2 x \$140)	\$280
STORAGE	Two Western Digital Raptor 74GB 10,000rpm SATA HDD (\$200x2), Two Hitachi 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm NCO SATA II HDD (2 x \$225)	\$850
GRAPHICS	Two BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express graphics cards with TV-out (2 x \$810)	\$1,620
DRIVE	LG dual-layer DVD±R/R±RW	\$10
CD	LG CD-RW	\$10
PERIPHERALS	Sony 1.44MB floppy drive	\$30
MONITOR	Dell 2404 24-inch LCD	\$1,100
KEYBOARD	Saitek Gamanti Keyboard	\$60
MOUSE	Logitech Razer Diamondback Optical Mouse	\$60
SPEAKERS	Creative S750 7.1 Speaker System	\$150
TOTAL COST		\$5,404

THIS RIG HAS TURNED US INTO BONA FIDE WATER-COOLING FANS.

EXTREME TECH

TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech.com's Jason Cross cures your technology ills

I'M CONSIDERING UPGRADING MY GEFORCE FX 5200 TO A GeForce 6600 GT. How does the latter videocard handle games like *Half-Life 2* and *Battlefield 2*. I don't demand very high resolutions (I'm fine at around 1024x768), nor do I need antialiasing (unless, of course, the card can handle it).

Tristan Soramaki

The card you're considering would provide a huge boost in performance over the FX 5200. Make sure you get the "GT" model, not the regular GeForce 6600. The one without the "GT" moniker is significantly slower, and you'll very quickly find yourself in the same situation you're in now. At a resolution of 1024x768 with no antialiasing, a 6600 GT will run *Half-Life 2* and *Battlefield 2* just fine, provided the rest of your computer isn't really slow or low on RAM.

Is there a way to track my computer's power consumption built into WinXP Home SP2? If not, is there a share- or freeware program available online? Also, I have a dual-layer DVD burner, but I

can't find any dual-layer (or 8.4GB) burnable DVD-Rs! Any idea where to get them?

Oshi Jagar

I'm not exactly sure what you mean by "track your computer's power consumption." Do you want to know how many watts it's drawing at any given moment or simply have a record of how long the battery has lasted in your laptop? Either way, there's nothing built into Windows XP (SP2 or otherwise) that will help you. Generally speaking, all the various components in your PC don't "report" exactly how much juice they're using, so there's really no way for the OS to know about it and no way for software (shareware or freeware) to read it. A Google search will turn up tons of laptop battery test utilities, but it doesn't sound like that's what you want to do. Your best bet is to go pick up a simple plug wattmeter. These devices run about \$30 to \$40 and couldn't be simpler—just plug one into an outlet, plug the device (your computer) into the meter, and it'll show you how much wattage your machine is draw-

ing. Simple!

As for your second question: Dual-layer DVD media is becoming more and more common, and you can find it everywhere from office supply megastores like Staples to large computer shops such as CompUSA, or even your local Best Buy. If you run into trouble, online computer shops carry that stuff. I noticed you wrote "DVD-R" there, though. The vast majority of broadly available (at least in brick-and-mortar stores) dual-layer media is DVD+R. If your drive supports that, you're golden. If it only supports DVD-R dual-layer media, you might have to resort to online shops.

I bought a BFGTech GeForce 6600 GT OC videocard, and it's running fine. Tweak utility *RivaTuner* measures the card's core clock speed at 299.3MHz when my machine is idle. Jumping into a 3D game or some application that uses the card changes that to 526.5MHz. Is this normal?

Ghowthoo

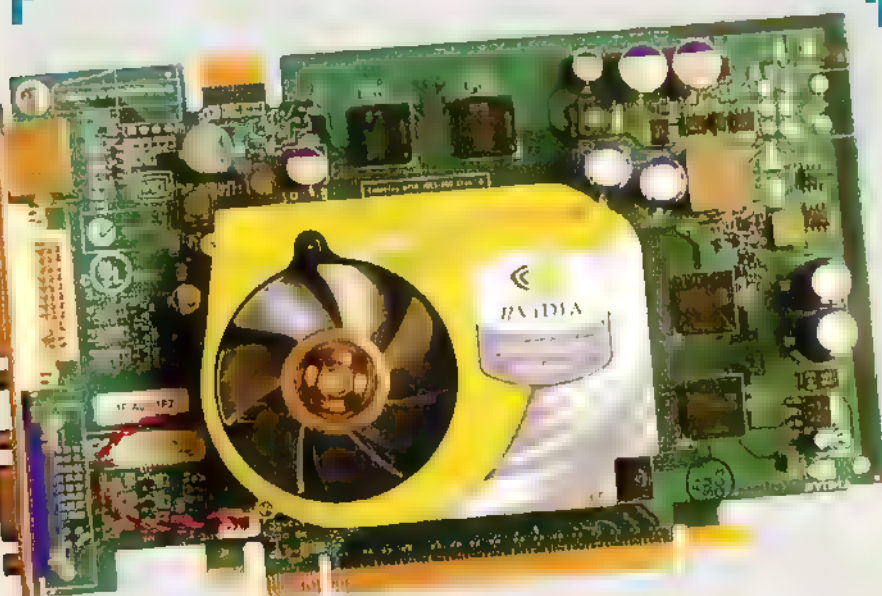
Yep, that's the way it's supposed to work! Nvidia's graphics cards reduce power consumption, and therefore produce less heat and spin the fan down to produce less noise, by using a lower clock speed when all you're doing is basic 2D Windows stuff, because all that stuff runs superfast anyway. They kick up to full operating speed when you run a 3D application. This makes them run hotter, and the fan usually has to spin up and get a little louder, but you don't typically notice it with all the game's sound effects and such.

What RAM configuration is better: 512MB dual channel or 784MB single channel?

All Rodriguez

I'm not sure how you get to 784MB. You mean 768MB, right? Anyway, it really depends on the type of application you're running. Most games benefit from additional memory bandwidth, at least more than they benefit from the relatively small increase from 512MB to 768MB. So dual-channel 512MB would probably be better. Applications like *Photoshop* tend to eat up as much RAM as they can, and the speed penalty for running out of RAM and hitting the hard disk is pretty big. So 768MB of single-channel RAM might be better there. These days, RAM is pretty inexpensive if you buy it from a good online store. If you really want to solve the problem, buy two 512MB sticks and get 1GB dual-channel running.

I'M CONSIDERING UPGRADING MY VIDEOCARD TO A GEFORCE 6600 GT. HOW DOES IT HANDLE GAMES LIKE *HALF-LIFE 2*?



MANUAL TUNE BFGTech
PROUDLY GeForce
6600 GT

Got questions? Send them to
Tech_Medics@extremetech.com

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Digital Illusions
GAME: SHOOTER



Bruce: In a time before the global war on terror made me spend most of my waking hours hiding in my house writing *Guild Wars* fan fiction, Tom and I played a game called *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis*. It was good, except for the fact that Tom won, which made it one of the worst games ever. Actually, every game that Tom wins is a bad game because that means it has fatal bugs. But for one of the worst games ever made, *Operation Flashpoint* was pretty good. Tom says this game is just about exactly the same.

Tom: Unfortunately, there's no way to play multiplayer games with bots enabled, so Bruce and I have to take it online. Here's the deal: We'll each play on opposite sides and see who can get the highest team score. The winner will be the one who scores highest in two out of three games. I start us out on a nice 32-player Mashtur City map. I'll take the Middle Eastern Coalition so Bruce isn't confused by the non-English speaking.

Bruce: It's good that Tom explained what sides we were on, because I thought MEC was short for Mexicans. I don't remember a lot of dune buggies in *Operation Flashpoint*, but maybe that was because Tom didn't install the dune buggy hack. I also don't remember helicopters being this tough to fly...ever. I crashed the helicopter three times on takeoff before one of my teammates requested that I "GET OUT OF THE HELO DUMMASS!!!" I guess I shouldn't



▲ The Kubra Dam valley—which actually looks like Exit 2 off the New Jersey Turnpike.

assume that was me—maybe he was talking to an actual "dumass."

Tom: On a few occasions, I could actually see the helicopter taking off from the gas station on the rise over the city. It would rise way up into the air, keel over to one side, arc back downward, and then plow rotor-first into the ground. At the time, I remember thinking, "Ha ha, some dumbass newbie is keeping the American Black Hawk out of circulation."

Bruce's team score was -12 after the first game, probably from landing upside down on his teammates. Now he's trying to talk me into playing into some obscure Napoleonic war game for this article instead of *Battlefield 2*. I told him I'd find a more fair way for us to play and promised that if he won, we could play whatever he wanted for the next article. So the new idea is that we'll be on the same team, in a squad, and he



▲ Tom carefully positions artillery to seal off bridges.

can stick with me. Whoever gets the highest team score wins.

Bruce: I've agreed to Tom's terms because I'm pretty good at team games, like that *Lord of the Rings* board game that you have to play cooperatively or else the dark lord will win. I hope this is that kind of game.

Tom: This time, we're on an Operation Clean Sweep server as the Americans. I start out at the airfield, hop into a Super Cobra, and take off. Since I'm the squad leader, Bruce spawns as my nose gunner. I can hear him sort of randomly shooting the machine gun, and occasionally he seems to figure out how to launch a missile. Eventually, he wises up and starts bailing out to fight on the ground.

Bruce: After doing some research on message boards about how overpowered airpower is, I realize that Tom is just trying to make up for my

TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

PLAYERS



Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk

When he's not writing about nerdy war games, Bruce Geryk spends his days putting a hard-earned medical degree to good use.

superior skills by using the better equipment. That's fine, because I am more of a stealth commando type anyway. I bail out of the helicopter a few times, and then Tom finally explains that there's a parachute key, which is 9, for "parac9ute," I guess. I manage to sneak up to an enemy flag all by myself and start the complex flag-capturing process. About halfway through, another soldier shows up and starts investigating the little sandbag barrier like he has never seen one before. He must be a newbie.

I start to type some kind of friendly greeting when I realize that the name above his head is red. I think that means he's an enemy. Panicked, I empty my whole clip into him from point-blank range. He must be playing with an invulnerability hack, because he doesn't die. Then he kills me one second later.

Tom: Bruce isn't getting a lot of kills, but he is keeping the enemy busy and depleting their ammunition. I have to remind him not to bail out over the ocean while I'm heading back to repair and rearm, but otherwise, he seems to be getting the hang of it (although in the chat he keeps typing things like "/wave" and "/bow"). There are only about 10 people on each team, so it's easy to keep the helicopter, knocking back the MEC vehicles as they try to hold us off the northern tip of the peninsula. There's only one MEC player using their jets, which would normally shut down my helicopter shenanigans in short order. Luckily for me, he doesn't know what he's doing, which is one of the advantages of playing a game like *Battlefield 2* the same week it's released. By the time the round is over, I have 68 team points. Bruce has -3. At least it's an improvement. I'm going to have to work out something else for us to do. I think I have an idea.

Bruce: Tom really likes medieval fantasy



▲ One of Bruce's tanks charges into Tom's base. Tom: Can you say "roadkill"?



▲ Bruce peers through fancy binoculars. He prefers a monocle.



▲ Suddenly, *BF2* is starting to look a whole lot like an RTS.



▲ Bruce's bots keep control of the Zatar Wetlands helicopter for most of the game.

Kubra Dam map, which is bad news, since it's got a lot of vertical displacement that makes it more confusing to navigate. We hop into the tank at the end of the map, and I let Bruce drive; he'll be less likely to get shot out of the cupola if he's safe inside.

Bruce: Now Tom's mad because he got confused while driving the tank in one of our very first games and didn't realize that he had turned so many times that the base he was attacking was actually the base we had originally spawned

tracked right now by EA cheat-prevention commandos who will come to my house and confiscate all the stories I've been writing about *Guild Wars*. I want to use this forum to formally apologize to the ESRB and RIAA for using this game in a nonapproved manner.

Tom: I finally have to hop out of the buggy and go find Bruce to help him figure out why he can't sprint. None of his explanations—"maybe my character is out of shape," "maybe my character tore a ligament," "maybe my character is a conscientious objector"—makes any sense. Instead, I find him lying prone on the ground, slowly creeping toward me. A quick press of the Z key solves his problem.

Bruce: Just like Tom not to tell me about the Z key, which apparently makes your character quaff an energy drink or a stamina potion or something.

Tom: As we're speeding down the path in our buggy, an American soldier pops up, running away from us. Bruce fires wildly, and bullets patter in the dirt all around the fleeing enemy. When it becomes clear that Bruce is about to overheat the gun, I tap F3 and kill the guy with the SAW mounted on the passenger seat. Bruce accuses me of stealing his kill and asks if there's a button he can press to not forgive me.

Bruce: I got 12 points this time, which is pretty good work, I think. Tom has 9 or 5 or I guess 95, but that's not the point. The point is that Tom is really getting into the Mexican role-playing thing because he keeps calling me "Sancho." That's cute.

Tom: While looking online for a trainer or aimbot or something to enhance Bruce's in-game

I CRASHED THE HELICOPTER THREE TIMES ON TAKEOFF BEFORE ONE OF MY TEAMMATES REQUESTED THAT I "GET OUT OF THE HELO DUMMASS!!!"

games, so even though we're playing like the most advanced combat game known to nonterrorists, he devises an elaborate setup in which he's a knight and I'm the squire. He makes me the squad leader, which doesn't seem appropriate for a squire, but whatever. He tells me to pick a support class and says I can "support" him by giving him more ammo when he runs out. Since I plan to make every ammo handoff a perfect, in-your-gut, Peyton Manning exchange, I assume my 100 percent success rate means I'm going to win.

Tom: Now I have my own private Sancho Panza. The trick will be having Bruce stick close enough not to get lost, but staying far enough back not to get killed so I can spawn off him. This time, we're playing as the MEC on the

from I guess in the spirit of international fairness and reconciliation, I should clarify that when I say Tom did that, it would be more fair and balanced to say that I did that.

Tom: We've got all the flags along the dam, but the Americans have the flags at the far end of the valley. I hop into a buggy and tell Bruce, who is safely hidden between a building and a mountain, to get in. For some reason, it's taking him forever to reach me.

Bruce: When Tom tells me to quit hiding and jump in the buggy, I get a firsthand demonstration about why you should only play games the way EA legally says you can in the user agreement. My punishment for deleting the "Challenge Everything" movie that plays before the game starts is that I can't sprint. I'm probably being

LAST MONTH...

Playing all these WWII tactical strategy games paid off as Tom and Bruce used the "bone horror panzer blitz" to steamroll over a legion of monsters in Guild Wars.



▲ Tom's no "Air Wolf." Hell, he'd settle for "Air Lemming."

performance, I find a way we can play with bots. If I start up a single-player match, Bruce can type in my IP address for a direct connection, and voila! We're both in the same game with bots. So we're going to decide this thing not based on reflexes, but on leadership skills. We will each play as commanders with a team of bots. To keep things simple, we're on the Zatar Wetlands map, in which each side starts with a single base and fights over a single spawn point in the middle. The rules are that we can direct bots and we can defend our main spawn point, but we can't leave the confines of our respective bases. Here goes.

Bruce: I see that after all that business, Tom managed to finagle a way to turn the whole thing into an RTS, which is his favorite kind of game. This kind of reminds me of *Sacrifice*, which is a great game that Tom refuses to play since he says it's just a glorified version of *Quake*. "All Tom's mana hoars have been slaughtered!" According to the map display, my robots seem to be doing pretty well, Tom's score is going down, and the white flag just turned my color. I jump in the dune buggy and consider heading for the action, but then I think better of it, since if I break the rules, I'll never hear the end of it. I tell some of my wingmen to "attack my target" and then sit around hoping they follow my orders to victory.

Tom: I start as an engineer and mine the entrances to my compound to fend off any approaching vehicles (these bases are far enough back from a spawn point that no one's going to hool it). Then I set up a steady cycle of

scanning followed by artillery shelling. It's pretty easy to get a fair number of kills this way, since the bots tend to move along predictable paths. Unfortunately, even though I've plotted attack orders for my three squads, Bruce's bots manage to get to the central flag first. They've got an APC parked up there and they manage to chew up my men and even a tank.

Bruce: I have more tickets than Tom, which is good, but there isn't much for me to do here, which is bad. Or maybe that's good. I hope the robots know what they're doing. I kind of want to get into the helicopter one of my robots is flying around, but that "dummass" comment kind of stung, so I don't. Tom's robots take back the flag I had, but I've still got the most tickets. Every now and then one of my robots spawns and goes running out the northeast gate. Sometimes the tank goes out the west gate. I say "Roger that" a lot.

Tom: An American APC just rolled over one of my mines and blew up at the entrance to my base. Shortly thereafter, a few bots came in the other side of my compound, at which point a tank came rolling in where the APC had cleared the way through the mines. I think Bruce is setting up some kind of elaborate pincer maneuver with his squads.

Bruce: My robots sure bought a lot of tickets, so that was smart of them. I drop some artillery on a bunch of red dots and Tom's score goes down a few points. Success!

Tom: I'm on the wrong side of my base to get that tank with the TOW launcher. I get killed three times trying to drop mines near

him, and then Bruce hits me with a well-timed artillery strike. He must be watching my base pretty closely.

Bruce: I've found some kind of cool missile-launcher thing at my base, but I can't get it to work. Maybe it's just binoculars.

Tom: By the time I take the tank out, he's neutralized my flag. Once I get it back, all my bots come spawning in at once and then proceed to just sit there. I'm screaming the "follow my orders" macro at my squad leaders, but they don't seem terribly interested. We're below 100 tickets now, and Bruce still has 148.

Bruce: While I'm sitting at the binoculars, which you don't even have to put a quarter into, I call in supply crates and watch them parachute down. I'm not sure about them, though—it sounds suspiciously like some sort of world government oil-for-food scheme. My base is otherwise pretty boring.

Tom: A couple of my guys loop around toward the American base but don't get very far. Bruce must have seen them coming with his radar scan and sent a squad to head them off.

Bruce: Every now and then I see my helicopter off in the distance and think about how much more fun it would be if I was flying around out there. I figure my robots have everything under control, so I go into the kitchen to make a sandwich.

Tom: Bruce seems to be very carefully orchestrating two separate axes of attack. My troops are boxed in, and I'm doing my best to take out vehicles with the TOW missile. Occasionally, a Super Cobra does a few passes with rockets, and I try to dash to the AA emplacement. And now my guys have run off, leaving me under attack by Bruce's bots. I'm down to 83 tickets when they take the flag, leaving me in *Battlefield* heaven to look down and wait for one of my bots to grab a flag. After nearly 15 interminable minutes, during which J. Gonzales is my only surviving soldier but is off doing something that doesn't include grabbing a spawn point, Bruce wins the game at 97 to 0.



▼ Bruce, wearing his fancy American flag helmet, scores a direct hit on some water. Lousy H2O!

Tom wins the war but Bruce wins the final battle—or at least, his bots do.



➤ Midway promises *The Suffering: Ties That Bind* will outdo its predecessor in every way. See for yourself in this monstrously insane demo.



THIS MONTH'S CD-ROM

Yes—it's a CD. Due to a printing error, your disc says DVD-ROM on it, but we assure, you it's a CD. "Our bad," as the kids say. (And don't worry, no one else got a DVD either.) Sorry for the confusion.

AD INDEX

2K GAMES CIVILIZATION IV	87, 89
2K GAMES ELDER SCROLLS OBLIVION	65
2K GAMES BET ON SOLDIER	14-15
2K GAMES SERIOUS SAM	73
2K GAMES SHATTERED UNION	2-3
CHIPS & BITS CHIPS AND BITS	99
CREATIVE LABS AUDIGY	51
CYBERPOWER SYSTEMS CYBERPOWER PC	28-29, 69
D. SKIN D. SKIN	39
IBUYPOWER IBUYPOWER PC	24-25
MICROSOFT AGE OF EMPIRES 3	10-11
MICROSOFT DUNGEON SIEGE II	35
MICROSOFT FABLE PC	53
MIDWAY GAMES, INC. SUFFERING: TIES THAT BIND	21, DEMO
NCSOFT CORP. CITY OF VILLAINS	100
NEWEGG.COM NEWEGG.COM	57
NINTENDO OF AMERICA ADVANCE WARS	41
SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT EQ2 DESERT OF FLAMES	59
THE GUILDHALL AT SMU GAME DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION	79
UBISOFT ENTERTAINMENT BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD	47
UBISOFT ENTERTAINMENT MYST V	6-7
VIVENDI UNIVERSAL GAMES F.E.A.R.	4-5

ENEMY TERRITORY: QW

Quake Wars looks damn good, and Activision claims this trailer is made from in-game footage! Could it be possible? You be the judge.

MATRIX: PATH OF NEO

Can the next *Matrix* game redeem the franchise? This trailer gives you a sampling of what to expect before you take the red pill.

BONE

Jeff Smith's comic, *Bone*, comes to life, and we couldn't be happier about it. Here's the first video of the game in action.

VALVE MODS

Check out *Half-Life* creator Valve's favorite mods for its game, including *Natural Specimen* and *Garry's Mod*.

AIRSTRIKE II: GULF THUNDER

Reflexive keeps us happy with this helicopter combat game full of missions featuring desert mayhem and nasty terrorists awaiting destruction.

HELLGATE: LONDON

You've seen the *Hellgate: London* trailer—now, check out this raw gameplay footage and see what makes this a definite game to watch for.

THE SIMS 2

Love *The Sims 2*? Love this magazine? Then show your love for both with these bonus skins made exclusively for CGW!

CHUZZLE

Here's the latest gem from our good

buddies at PopCap Games. It's like Koosh ball mixed with some old-school gaming.

TIP TOP

This addictive, Vegas-inspired PopCap game has you matching slot symbols and pulling off crazy combos.

THE SIMS 2: NIGHTLIFE

Take your *Sims* out for a night on the town! This trailer highlights many new features found in this latest expansion pack.

XPIRE

Tired of having to Alt-Tab out of your game to instant message your online buddies? That's a problem no more with this handy little app.

DON'T MISS OUT! UPGRADE
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DAI! DAI! DAI! WHOOH!

I (heart) John Romero...and you should, too

"OH, HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLENI!"

That seems to be the subtext to much of the online reaction regarding John Romero's departure from Midway. Granted, by the time you read this, it's old news—but it's only yesterday's news as I write this. Really, Romero's saga has been kind of an ongoing news ticker of sorts, running for years along the periphery of the gaming community and pausing only for brief Derek Smart updates. Now, some four years after Ion Storm Dallas burned up upon reentry to reality, the incredibly public face of that legendary debacle has either left or been let go from Midway and the *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows* team. Commence the gloating, the self-satisfied tsk-tsks, the smug "he had it coming," and all the other anti-Romero sentiment. But ask yourself...what did this guy ever do to you?

Sure, he made *Daikatana*. But judging from the so-horrible-it-barely-counts-as-pathetic sales numbers, it would seem most people not only dodged that bullet, but also weren't even on the same continent when that cap gun was fired. Look, I reviewed that flaming bag of turds for this magazine, and I'm not all *Lord of the Dance* street-jigging over this bit of news. Why? A couple of reasons, actually: First, I know that the truly ingenious hidden pleasure of *Daikatana* actually lies in singing it to the Knack's "My Sharona." "Duh-nuh, duh-nuh, duh-nuh, duh, duh, dunnah-nuh! Du-duh-nuh, duh-nuh, duh-nuh, Dai-katana! Dai! Dai! Dai! Whoo! Ooh, my great big shiny sword, my shiny sword..." Really, it's just about impossible to stop. Second, I know that the ingenious hidden truth of John Romero is that he's a generally nice guy. Why celebrate his misfortune?

And I feel this despite the fact that I know John Romero would like nothing more than to see me run over by a bus stuffed full of morbidly obese people wearing flaming tricorne hats made of bullets. This goes back to my less-than-glowing *Daikatana* review, where a little bit of hyperbole (which stated something along the lines of "that game made me want to punch every *Daikatana* team member in the face") was misconstrued as an actual threat of physical violence. For the record, no faces have yet been harmed by me (discounting, of course, the faulty DNA I have passed along to my pitiable offspring).

So, what was John Romero's crime? Why are people taking pleasure in his latest career setback? A big part of it is easy: hubris. The whole "Suck it down" and "John Romero is going to make you his bitch" career missteps have been too thoroughly documented, and if you've missed those reports, I guess it behooves me to tell you that you polish your shoes with Shinola.

But I think there's more to it than that. Of all the people who were part of the Do-It-Yourself Suddenly Rich Club in the early heyday of gaming, Romero was most like you and me: a regular guy you could identify with, gleefully enjoying his success. The other prominent faces from that time—many of them arguably both more gifted and crucial to gaming's early growth—weren't so easy to see yourself in. John Carmack is some kind of crazy genius who discusses actual rocket science recreationally, Dan Bunten Berry became Dani Bunten Berry, and Richard Garriott has that whole fey "Lord British" shtick. But Romero? He was the kid drawing violent comics in the back of his notebook like you, the kid with the long hair you only dreamed you could pull off, the dude sneaking his own face into *Doom II*, the guy



>> I KNOW THAT THE INGENIOUS HIDDEN TRUTH OF JOHN ROMERO IS THAT HE'S A GENERALLY NICE GUY. WHY CELEBRATE HIS MISFORTUNE?

happily dropping a ton of money on a car you drooled over and vowed to buy for yourself as soon as you won the lottery. If he could do it, why couldn't you? Wealth and fame suddenly seemed attainable.

But the vast majority of those gaming dreamers never got their fame and fortune...while Romero kept his, got more, and worked in ludicrously decked-out penthouse offices that were initially celebrated by gamers long before being universally derided and ridiculed. There was arrogance in Romero, and he definitely and nakedly courted celebrity. Still, it takes an audience to make someone a rock star, and gamers were holding up their lighters for a good long while.

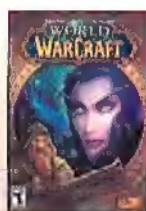
And then we (and I'm including myself here) turned on Romero once it dawned on us that maybe he didn't deserve all this acclaim. It's a lot easier to make fun of a scapegoat and distance yourself than to admit you made the same mistake of valuing flash over substance. Everything that we initially celebrated became fodder for ridicule...but if Romero was an ass, well then so was every previously envious geek lusting after the cars, clothes, and hawt gamer girlfriends. And who wants to be an ass? Judging from our actions—then and now—apparently a lot of us do. /Robert Coffey

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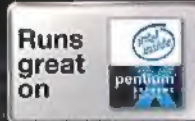
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